

HELL MODE

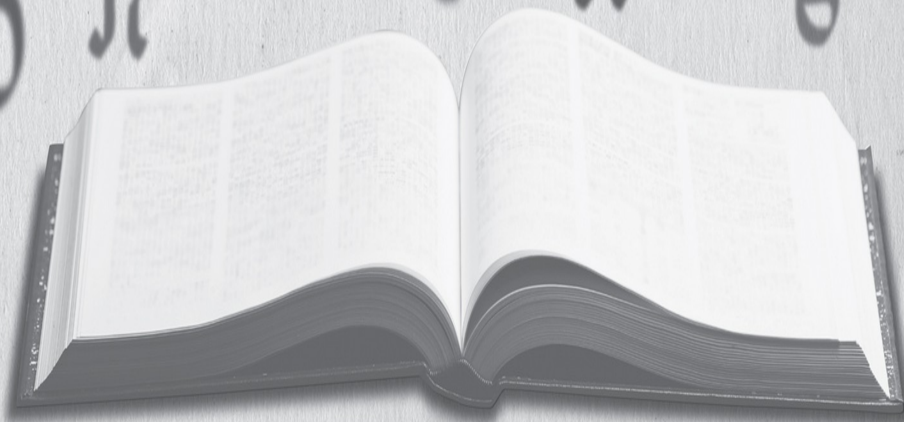
The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing

STORY HAMUO

ART MO

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Chapter 1: The Academy Entrance Exam

Several months had passed since the House Granvelle Affair, and it was now March. At the moment, Allen was helping the gardener with his work. Although he had become a guest of House Granvelle as of last November and was no longer obligated to work, Allen still wanted to do so until he had to leave for the Academy.

Ah, it's here.

Allen stood up, dusted his hands off, and walked to the main gate as a single carriage pulled through. When it stopped, a pink-haired girl leaped out.

"ALLEN!"

"Welcome."

It was, of course, Krena. She had made the journey to Lord Granvelle's mansion from Krena Village. The moment she laid eyes on Allen, her face lit up like a light bulb. Following right behind her was the boy with a face that looked even more like a bumpkin's than before, Dogora.

"Been a while, Allen."

"Sure has, Dogora."

Dogora had always been bigger than Allen, but now he was a whole head taller.

Three days from now, these two would be taking the entrance exam at Academy City. Viscount Granvelle had invited them to stay in his mansion until their departure. To be exact, he had invited Sword Lord Krena; Dogora was sort of a tagalong. Both now stood in front of the three-story mansion, the size of nothing they had ever seen before, with clothes and weapons well-worn with use on their backs and their jaws on the ground.

Hm, so Pelomas really didn't come with them. Just as he said.

Pelomas, the son of Krena Village's chief Deboji, possessed the Merchant Talent, which was not in line with the raison d'être of the Academy established by the Five Continent Alliance. Instead of the Academy, he would be attending a commercial school run by the Merchant's Guild located in the kingdom's capital.

Two months earlier, Allen had asked for leave to go home. There was a lot he had to tell his family, such as the facts that he had quit his job as manservant, had become a guest of House Granvelle, and would be heading to Academy City in April, and that both Rodin's and Gerda's families would be exempt from the head tax going forward. It had been four years since he left home, and he wanted to pay his parents a visit before setting off for the Academy. After first passing the official letter from the viscount confirming the two families' exemption from paying tax to the village chief, Allen had headed straight home.

Rodin had asked, "What did you do?" in surprise when Allen brought out his ornamented silver dagger. However, he withheld comment regarding Allen quitting the manservant job.

Theresia, though worried, only replied, "Just take care of yourself, okay?" Perhaps as a mother, she felt her son was rushing through life a little too quickly.

Allen then dropped off a hundred gold, explaining that he would be unable to send money home for a while. Both Rodin's and Theresia's faces turned white at what seemed, to them, like an astronomical amount.

After a brief pause, Rodin cried, "How on earth can we accept all this money?!" Allen told them that he still had more than six hundred gold in a bid to reassure them. Only then did Rodin fold and accept the bag of coins, but not before muttering, "Seriously, what *did* you do?!" with a face that looked worn-out from being surprised.

Mash badgered Allen for stories, so Allen recounted his adventurers fighting goblin villages, orc villages, and armored ant nests. Mash hung on every word, his eyes sparkling. Naturally, Allen made no mention of the murdergalsh. He was not interested in traumatizing his younger brother.

Allen shook himself and brought his attention back to the present moment as Krena announced herself in an energetic voice and stepped inside the mansion with Dogora. The first thing that they saw was the viscount and his family standing in wait in the entrance hall to greet the visiting Sword Lord.

"We welcome you to our home," Viscount Granvelle said warmly.

Back when the viscount—a baron at the time—visited Krena Village to observe a great boar hunt in person, he did not have the opportunity to meet Krena before returning to Granvelle City. Consequently, this was the first time the two were meeting. The viscount offered a hand for a handshake; Krena accepted it, acting as if they were equals.

Well, as a Sword Lord, chances are that she might eventually become at least a marchioness.

Viscount Granvelle's smile remained on his face, indicating that he did not take any offense at Krena's attitude. Allen had already warned him of her personality beforehand.

A Sword Lord was considered a valuable asset to the kingdom at large. Sword Lord Dverg, who was said to still be active on the battlefield, had been born a serf but now held the title of marquess. That was two ranks higher than viscount. In a way, peerage was one of the go-to rewards that the royal family handed out, having been left destitute after decades of unending war. In this world, only nobility were duty bound to fight the Demon Lord Army. As Viscount Granvelle had explained, Krena would be made baron the moment she graduated from the Academy.

"So you're Krena," Cecil said, stepping forward. "Nice to meet you."

Krena started as if something had come to mind. "Are you Lady Cecil?! I'm so happy to meet you!" She grabbed the other girl's hands and shook

them energetically. The silence that followed prompted Krena to tilt her head in confusion. "What's the matter, Lady Cecil?"

Although Allen had told both Cecil and Krena to get along with each other beforehand, the way Krena approached with no hesitation whatsoever—despite this being their first meeting on top of their difference in social class—had left Cecil at a loss for how to react. Just as Allen mentally willed her back into action, she finally gathered herself enough to stammer that it was nothing. She then shot Allen an accusatory glance to gloss over her bewilderment.

"Okay!" Krena replied.

Huh? Did Cecil just glare at me? Nah, I must have imagined it.

Over the four years they had spent together, Cecil's prickly attitude toward Allen had softened considerably. However, when he had resigned from his job as manservant, she had berated him up and down. "How dare you quit being my personal servant without telling me?!" were her exact words. It was only recently that her anger seemed to have subsided somewhat.

There was a specific reason why Krena had been invited to the mansion. Three years from now, Allen would be going to fight the Demon Lord Army with Cecil. However, as a Summoner and a Wizardess, they both had very low Endurance. Allen had the Stone-type cards, but overreliance on them would take up slots and limit the tactics he could employ in battle.

Consequently, Allen had come up with the idea to invite Krena, whose Sword Lord was the ultimate class for physical combat, to join them. Since she was going to have to head to the battlefield either way, they might as well all go together. To that end, today was partly meant to be the first get-together between the two girls.

However, there was no guarantee that they were all going to be stationed together after graduation. The viscount had therefore visited the royal capital out of concern for his daughter to inquire how assignments were decided. What he learned was that Giamut—the nation that represented the Central Continent—and the rest of the Five Continent Alliance had almost exclusive say in such matters. Not even the king of Ratash could answer Viscount Granvelle's question.

Officially, soldiers such as Sword Lord Dverg may have been under the Ratash king's direct employ, but there were many things that the king was not privy to. This meant that, when it came to their lives at the Academy and their eventual fight with the Demon Lord, Allen and his friends would have to do a lot of figuring out for themselves how things would turn out.

So, for now the plan was to have Krena hang around them at the Academy. She would be a very reliable addition to their party for when they would go crawling the numerous dungeons supposedly within Academy City.

I'll be working to help Krena and Cecil level their way up through the dungeons. It'd be really helpful if I had a way to check their Statuses in my grimoire...

Recently, Allen had gone to sleep every night clutching his grimoire and fervently praying to the gods. A Sword Lord had been born as his neighbor, and he had ended up serving a noble family with a daughter his own age who was a Wizardess. There was no way these were mere coincidences. Therefore, if Allen was fated to vanquish the Demon Lord Army together with them, then being able to keep an eye on their Statuses was an absolute necessity.

Whether or not to include Dogora in their party was still up in the air. The fact that Mihai, also a one-star class, had lost his life caused Allen to worry that the battlefield might be too dangerous for Dogora. In the end, he wanted to leave Dogora the freedom to make his own choice.

Although the magic tutor had stressed that Demon Lord history was highly confidential, Allen planned on eventually sharing it with Krena and Dogora in secret. They might not know how their military service would play out, but they could at least spend their three years in the Academy working toward the same goal, mindful of what was to come afterward.

Dinner was served soon after Krena and Dogora's arrival.

This scene here is making Dogora look respectable by comparison.

Beside Dogora, who was stiff with nerves and doing his best to eat as politely as possible, Krena was attacking her food with a vengeance, giving the impression that it had been a long while since she last had a full belly. She had a steak impaled on a fork in one hand and a large piece of bread in the other, and was taking bites from both in turn. Thomas simply stared at the sight, his hand stopped and his mouth hanging open.

"Aren't you gonna eat, Allen?" Krena asked between bites.

"I'll eat after this."

With a practiced hand, Allen deftly cleared the empty plates from the table. Both Krena and Dogora watched him with incredulity in their eyes as, for some reason, Cecil seemed to emanate pride.

When the meal was winding down, Viscount Granvelle turned to Allen and said in a formal tone, "Allen, take good care of them all."

"Of course. I will do my utmost," Allen replied, bowing deeply as if expressing his regret at ending the life he had lived these past four years.

Now then, I have to make sure that I find "that" at Academy City—I bet it exists. For now, let's go gather information at the Adventurer's Guild. Maybe I'll learn something that could prove crucial to my fight against the Demon Lord Army in three years.

Allen had a task to fulfill in Academy City even more important than attending school.

Three days later, Allen, Krena, Cecil, and Dogora set off for Academy City as planned.

□ □ □

“Allen, it’s Academy City!” Krena exclaimed, dazzled as she leaped off the bottom step of the staircase descending from the magic ship. Cecil and Dogora followed right behind her.

The group of four children had just landed on an expansive landing pad in Academy City. The city was massive. Its official name was Academy City of the Kingdom of Ratash, and it boasted a population in the hundreds of thousands, making it multiple times the size of Granvelle City. If they all passed their entrance exam, this was where they would be spending the next three years of their lives.

Children their age—clearly exam takers as well—milled all around. More than twenty thousand examinees would gather here each year, so the city had special transportation set up and increased the number of direct flights from each realm.

A voice overhead repeatedly blared, “Examinees, please head to the station with a green roof to board the Academy-bound magic train.”

They have trains here too?!

When Allen and his friends arrived at the green-roofed station, they were greeted by station attendants informing them that the trip on the magic train cost one silver. They paid up and headed for the home platform.

“It really is a train!” Allen cried. The others mouthed the term “train” without really understanding until it finally came into view. Then they all exclaimed, “Whoa!” in unison.

A bona fide train! Was this made in Baukis as well?!

The Empire of Baukis, a nation run by dwarves located to the northwest of the Central Continent, provided both the required technology and partial funding for this educational institution. This city boasted such excellent infrastructure that it was said to be a more comfortable place to live than even the royal capital.

“We...walk into this thing?” Cecil asked apprehensively.

“So it seems,” Allen replied casually, stepping through the doors that had opened with a hiss.

His nonchalance prompted Cecil to blurt out, “Why do you seem so fine with it?!”

All around them, serfs and commoners hailing from every corner of the country stood frozen in place as they stared at the magic train in a daze.

I had no idea they had trains like this. Come to think of it, Mihai never really told us all that much about Academy City itself. It was the magic tutor, not Mihai, who told us that the headmaster was a high elf. There are surprises everywhere here. Maybe he was trying to keep it from sounding too exciting so Cecil wouldn’t get her expectations up?

Before long, the train started moving. A look through the windows at the passing scenery revealed that, as Allen had expected, this city was quite technologically developed. Five-story buildings lined major avenues like they were perfectly ordinary, painting a townscape practically alien compared to Granvelle City, the capital of a mere countryside fiefdom.

Krena was plastered against the window, her head twisting back and forth as she repeatedly exclaimed, “So cool!” She was enjoying herself so much that it was making Cecil draw back a little and wonder if this was how a Sword Lord really behaved.



For a split second, the sight made Allen worry about Krena's performance on the exam, but by the next moment, he thought better of it. *She's leveled up and all—all those points in Intelligence means she ought to do fine.*

He had heard that Krena and Dogora both started participating in the village's great boar hunts when they turned ten years old. All the level ups boosted their Intelligence, and with two whole years of studying, Allen expected them to pass the Academy's entrance exam without issue.

Apparently the exam is pure academics, with no practical elements involving swinging swords or anything. Meanwhile, I only had four months to study. What's more, all my studying was just sitting with Cecil while she reviewed everything she'd already learned prior... C'mon, man!

Allen did nurse a slight amount of dissatisfaction with the viscount for waiting until the end of the previous year to bring up the matter of him attending the Academy. The viscount had probably done so out of a desire to respect Allen's self-determination, but Allen wished he could have been told earlier. After all, he probably would have agreed even if the viscount had made the request when he was eight. Over the past four months, not a single reason to refuse had occurred to him. In all likelihood, the viscount had been wrestling with the question of what he could personally do for Cecil's sake this whole time.

Eventually, the magic train came to a stop at a station near the center of Academy City. As passengers staggered out, still in a daze, Allen and his friends struck off for the Academy.

The kingdom of Ratash had a population of around twenty million. Serfs and commoners might not end up conscripted, but Academy graduates would have no trouble at all finding employment anywhere within the country. With this in mind, a massive number of children came to knock on the doors of this institution each year.

When Allen passed through the tall wall that surrounded the school grounds, he found the open courtyard already filled to bursting with other examinees. An announcement played repeatedly over a loudspeaker-like magic tool set up in various places around the venue: "All examinees must first undergo the Appraisal Ceremony. Those who pass are to bring their assigned numbered tag to the reception counters in front of the school building."

"Appraisal Ceremony?" Krena parroted, tilting her head in bewilderment.

"That's what they're saying," Allen shrugged. "Looks like everyone's doing it."

Sure enough, there were several lines in the square, each leading to a set of equipment that Allen recognized from when he was five.

I see, so they Appraise everyone to prevent any Talentless from getting in. This reminds me of the story Captain Zenof told me about the noble who

claimed to be a Sword Lord despite only being a Swordsman. The man had failed to perform when his strength was needed most. Thinking about it now, that was probably on the battlefield and in the middle of a fight with the Demon Lord Army. I can only imagine the amount of trouble that ensued when the forces with him realized that they didn't have the fighting strength they thought they did.

The line made significant progress over the next hour. When it was Allen's group's turn, the examiner asked, "Is anyone here from a noble family?"

Cecil spoke up. "I'm from House Granvelle."

The staff member nodded and wrote something down.

Hm? They check for nobles here?

Then, the Appraising for the group began. "Please come forward one by one and place your hands on this crystal," the man said. Dogora went first.

Name: Dogora
HP: B
MP: D
Attack: A
Endurance: B
Agility: C
Intelligence: D
Luck: C
Talent: Ax User

"Ah, so you are an Ax User. That is a wonderful Talent."

Dogora was handed a numbered tag, indicating that he had passed the Appraisal.

Hmm, Dogora's Status hasn't changed. In other words, it isn't affected by age. And his Talent is "wonderful," huh?

Next was Cecil's turn. When her results showed up, the examiner exclaimed in appreciation.

Name: Cecil Granvelle
HP: C
MP: A
Attack: D
Endurance: C
Agility: B
Intelligence: S
Luck: B
Talent: Wizardess

“This is truly impressive! There are no issues with your Talent or stat rankings. Take this to reception.”

So, this is Cecil’s Status. Gotta write it down.

With Cecil also having passed her Appraisal—and Allen writing the details down—it was time for Krena to place her hands on the crystal. Just like when she was five, the crystal shone with a brilliant light.

[redacted]

Name: Krena
HP: S
MP: C
Attack: S
Endurance: A
Agility: A
Intelligence: C
Luck: B
Talent: Sword Lord

[redacted]

“Y-You’re a Sword Lord. Are you perhaps Sword Lord Krena?”

“Huh? Yes, that’s me.”

Krena looked surprised that the examiner knew her. In all likelihood, all the examiners had been informed beforehand that Krena would be coming. Naturally, Krena was given a pass and received a numbered tag.

This confirms that Status rankings aren’t affected by level or age. I guess a three-star class is rare even here.

Apparently, on average, around one Sword Lord was born in this country every decade. That was how rare it was. That said, the massive empire to the north had a few dozen Sword Lords, which meant the number was simply proportional to total population.

From what he heard from the viscount and magic tutor, Allen had figured out the general rarity of each star tier.

- One-star classes: One in ten people
- Two-star classes: One in a thousand people
- Three-star classes: Ten people in the kingdom
- Five-star classes: The existence of one is a miracle

The last to be Appraised was Allen. As the examiner was still reeling from the results of Krena’s Appraisal, Allen stepped forward and placed his hand on the crystal.

Light seemed to blast out almost as a physical wave, filling the square in its entirety. The surrounding examiners and examinees all whirled over in surprise and alarm.

“WHOAAAA!” cried Allen’s examiner as he squinted his eyes, his expectation rising as he tried to catch Allen’s reading.

[redacted]

Name: Allen
HP: E
MP: E
Attack: E
Endurance: E
Agility: E
Intelligence: E
Luck: E
Class: Summoner

[redacted]

“What... What is with these results?! All your stats are ranked ‘E’! Y-You fail.”

Looks like my class really does show up properly when I get Appraised now. But still, I failed, huh? I had a feeling this would happen when I heard they’re doing the Appraisal Ceremony again just now. I guess that’s the end of volume 3, then.

“Wha— You can’t fail Allen!” Cecil protested indignantly. At the same time, Krena asked, “Why did Allen fail?” Dogora stared fixedly at the readings panel as if confirming every letter one by one.

“Well, looks like I’ve failed, guys. Good luck with your exams! Let’s discuss where to meet up after you’re done.”

Cecil retorted, “Why’re you moving on like nothing happened?!”

I mean, there are still plenty of things I can do even without attending the Academy.

Honestly, Allen was fine with failing. He had known that all his stats would show up as “E” and had already considered the possibility that this might lead to his rejection. He had received a written notice from the viscount just in case, explaining that the Appraisal result from when he was five years old was mistaken and that he did indeed possess a Talent, but that letter clearly was not going to be of any help in this situation.

Still, this wasn’t an entire waste. There’s a lot that I can deduce now based on the fact that they fail Talented applicants if their stat rankings are low.

While in line, Allen had observed the examiners fail almost one out of every three examinees. It was obvious that just having a Talent was not enough to guarantee admittance. From this, Allen figured out two things:

- There is a variation in stat rankings among those with Talents, which affects how strong they could ultimately become.
- It is possible to estimate how strong someone can get based on their stat rankings.

The first implied that it was possible that two people could possess the same Talent yet have different stat rankings—for example, a Swordsman with low Attack was possible. The Academy, for its part, wanted Talented applicants with Statuses actually suited to their Talents. Based on the examiner's reaction, Krena, Cecil, and Dogora had all met this requirement.

The second meant growth was determined by stat rankings; it was possible to tell how strong someone could become just by looking at their stat rankings and doing the math. The Academy saw no point in accepting and training someone who, even after three years of education and training, would prove to be useless on the battlefield.

This was likely the real reason why there was no practical element to the entrance exam. Some applicants may have done some leveling, whereas some were still Lvl. 1. Whether someone had leveled up or not was a bad standard of judgment, as it did nothing to confirm how useful their Talent and stats were.

I see, they must have determined whether to pass someone or not based solely on their written exam results and the Appraisal from when they were five, but after those nobles falsified their Talents, they now conduct an Appraisal on the spot. This way, there's no way for applicants to lie about their Talents, plus the Academy also manages to weed out those with low stats. Two birds with one stone.

"What's all the commotion? You shouldn't make a scene just because you failed."

A blue-haired young man approached them. Based on his flippant aura, he was clearly not an examiner. At his side was a silver-haired elf, who seemed in the prime of his maturity. They had apparently been drawn by the fuss that Krena and Cecil were kicking up.

Oh! It's a real-life elf!

Allen was slightly excited at his first sight of a fantasy race since coming to this world.

"Uh, um, actually..."

After the examiner explained the situation, the blue-haired young man said, "Really? Let me take a look at the Appraisal results," and peered over.

Cecil closed in on him, demanding, "It makes no sense for Allen to have failed! I need an explanation for this!"

"What do you mean by 'it makes no sense'?" the man returned.

"It means exactly what it means! After all, Allen is strong enough to kill a murdergalsh by himself!" As someone who had watched the life-and-death battle between Allen and a murdergalsh up close, Cecil absolutely refused to accept this turn of events.

"A murdergalsh? At his age? Now, that is a feat indeed. And yet all his stat rankings are 'E.' It's true that I've never seen an Appraisal result like this..." The man turned and shrugged at the elf. "Maybe this really is your guy."

What does that last part mean?

The elf’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “So Lord Rohzen was right. A young man with all his stat rankings at ‘E’ really did show up this year.”

“Did Rohzen say anything else, Headmaster? It’s hard to make a call based on this alone.”

What’s going on? What’re they talking about?

“Our Lord is not so proficient at reading the future. In the first place, foresight is not a gift that naturally belongs to spirits. And more importantly, as I’ve asked time and again, can you stop referring to our object of worship so casually?”

“Ah, sorry. I’m not good at using ‘lord’ and ‘lady’ and all that.”

“So then, Sir Helmios. Can you help confirm the validity of this reading?”

“Gimme a sec; I’ll take a look.”

The blue-haired man’s golden eyes gleamed as he turned toward Allen.

Allen and Cecil both recognized the names “Helmios” and “Headmaster.” According to their magic tutor, Helmios was the name of the Hero who had been born in Giamut. This Helmios had referred to the elf as Headmaster, the title for the person at the very top of Academy City.

Helmios’s eyes glowed even brighter as he continued staring at Allen.

So, the Hero showed up. What’s he doing in a place like this? And when he said he’d “take a look,” he was talking about me, right?

“Uh, lemme see... His Attack is 570— Whoa! His Intelligence is 1,630!”

Hold on a damn moment! He totally has an Appraisal skill! And he’s just exposing my Status in front of the whole world! Why does a five-star Hero get an Appraisal skill while an eight-star like me doesn’t?! The gods are so going to get some prayers for this!

Allen practically bit his tongue trying not to exclaim, “Don’t read my stats out loud!” Doing so would have confirmed that Helmios really was reading his Status.

“His Intelligence would have to be ‘S’ to be higher than 1,600,” the headmaster said, peering at the plaque displaying Allen’s Appraisal results. “So why is it ‘E’ here?”

“Something’s not adding up,” Helios announced. “This Status isn’t enough to defeat a murdergalsh.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. His Attack, Agility, and Endurance are all lower than what a murdergalsh would have. He wouldn’t last a second. His Intelligence is high, sure, and his overall Status is close to that of an Archwizard, but he doesn’t have any magic skills listed.”

Okay, seriously, can you stop? That said, his analysis is correct. He’s not the Hero for nothing, I suppose.

“An Archwizard who can’t use magic...” The headmaster frowned as he tried to wrap his mind around what Helmios was saying.

“I believe this Talent that I’ve never heard of—‘Summoner’—is the key. Your name is Allen, right? Apparently the Appraisal Ceremony equipment is broken, so I’ll Appraise you myself.”

Cecil broke into a smile. “In other words, Allen passes, right?! Allen, you passed!”

“Hmm, but we *would* want to see a little bit of his powers as a Summoner. It’d be hard to make a call if we don’t know anything about what he can do.”

“Huh? That’s all you need? Allen, show them that large be—?!”

Allen stepped up from behind Cecil in a split second and covered her mouth. Can you not give away my personal info too?! So, how should I handle this? From what’s been said, it seems like they were looking for me. In that case...

“I’m sorry for the commotion, Mr. Examiner,” Allen said, ignoring Helmios’s expectant look. “Since I’ve failed, I’ll get out of your hair now. Wouldn’t want to waste any more of your time, with how long the line is behind me and all.”

“Uh...what? Huh?”

With Allen’s hand still over her mouth, Cecil made an indignant rumble that sounded something like, “What do you think you’re saying?!”

Helmios interrupted, “But I’m saying that I’ll pass you if you show me your power.”

Allen turned to him with a confused look. “I’m sorry. You don’t appear to be an examiner. May I ask who you are?”

Both the headmaster and examiner went, “Huh?!”

After a short pause, Helmios gathered himself and said, “Oh, I’m sorry. My name is Helmios. I’m the Hero, if you’ve heard of me.”

“Hero? Don’t think I have. Is that a reason why I *have* to show you my power?”

Another “Huh?!” went around. No one expected Allen to maintain his attitude even after learning of Helmios’s identity.

“Enough,” the headmaster cut in. “I, the headmaster, order you to show us. Would that do?”

“I refuse,” Allen replied firmly.

“*What*?!” The headmaster did not expect Allen to remain uncooperative still.

“If you’re admitted into the Academy, you’re going to have to show it off anyways,” Helmios pointed out. “Why are you so against it?”

“I never said that I’m against showing my Talent,” Allen returned.

“What?”

“I’m saying that I don’t want to show it for free.”

“What do you mean?”

“My Talent is so rare that even the headmaster has never seen or heard of it before, right? If you want to see it in action, then I want something in return.”

“Like what? Money?”

“No, I’m not interested in money. Judging from your conversation with the headmaster, you’ve seen my Status. Would you mind showing me yours using the crystal? Then I’ll call it even.”

Allen knew that the whole thing about the Appraisal Ceremony equipment being broken was just something that Helmios had made up on the spot. Helmios shot a glance at the headmaster, who sighed and nodded to give his permission.

Helmios shrugged. “I mean, I don’t really mind.” He approached the crystal.

Awesome, I’m glad that worked. This is going to be really helpful for my analysis. I haven’t the faintest idea why the Hero would be roaming around the exam grounds, but this is a lucky break for me.

Three years from now, Allen would have to head to war. Just how much strength would he need to survive it? Just how powerful was the Hero who had managed to beat the Demon Lord Army back and restore Giamut’s borders? This was what Allen wanted to know.

When the Hero’s hand touched the crystal, it glowed—not as brightly as it had for Allen, but still more than enough to be impressive.

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   Name: Helmios
HP: S
MP: A
Attack: S
Endurance: S
Agility: S
Intelligence: A
Luck: A
Talent: Hero
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Whoa, it’s all just “A”s and “S”s. This is more of a physical combat build, I see. Pretty much as I’d expected.

Allen could not help doing some light analysis while copying down the reading into his grimoire.

“Okay, I’ve shown you my Status. Now show me your Talent.”

“Yes, sir.”

Other nearby examiners and examinees had also been watching the exchange between Allen and Helmios. They gave Allen their undivided attention as he thrust out his hand.

Mousey, come out.

Beast H, a Summon in the form of a small mouse, suddenly appeared on Allen’s palm, prompting gasps and murmurs from all around along the lines of “A mouse came out of his hand!” Everyone leaned in for a closer look, including Krena and Dogora, neither of whom had yet seen Allen’s powers in action. Cecil, the only person who had, seemed proud for some reason.

With his eyes still on the mouse, Helmios said, "You called out—no, *summoned* a beast out of thin air. Thus, 'Summoner.' I see how it is."

Similarly, the headmaster also seemed to be analyzing what he was seeing. He muttered under his breath, "This looks like the ability to control beasts. It seems similar to a Tamer... I'd heard they were wiped out by the Demon Lord, but...are the beasts Summoned by a Summoner different?"

Hold on, did he just say that the Demon Lord wiped out the Tamers?

An adventurer Allen knew, Raven, had confirmed before that this world did not have a class that fought by controlling monsters. Turns out it had existed in the past, though.

"Now, I've shown you my Talent, so I'll be taking my leave."

Allen's understanding was that he only needed to display an example of what he was capable of as a Summoner to pass this Appraisal Ceremony. Without waiting for the headmaster's answer, he headed to the examiner—Mousey still in his hands—to pick up a numbered tag, then headed for the school building. Krena and the others followed. Helmios and the headmaster silently watched the children go, appearing lost in thought.

When they were out of earshot, Cecil hissed, "You almost failed, Allen!"

"If it happens, it happens," Allen shrugged. I can still go to the battlefield even if I don't get into the Academy, after all.

There were multiple ways to get sent off to the front lines. Allen had looked them up ahead of time in case he failed to enroll for some reason.

- Graduate from the Academy
- Volunteer
- Accompany a noble
- Go as a sentenced criminal

He was already going through the process of applying for the Academy, so there was no need to explain the first one.

Volunteering was apparently an option available to all with no barrier to entry. Those without a Talent would not be dispatched to fight on the front lines, but armies still needed people to cook, transport supplies, provide medical attention, and any other number of tasks that could be done from the relative safety of the back. This system was only really used in Giamut, and those without any other means to make a living made up a bulk of the volunteers.

The third method was an option due to the fact that very few nobles went to the battlefield alone. Instead, they would bring subordinates along, which the kingdom permitted. Mihai had been one of the few exceptions who did not, but there were nobles who would have more than ten people accompany them. These escorts did not necessarily have to be the noble's personal attendants; they could even be adventurers or mercenaries, with the only requirement being that they had a Talent. This was the option that

Allen had planned on defaulting to on the off chance he failed to get into the Academy.

The fourth method was a way for people—especially those with Talents—caught for committing crimes to shorten their sentence. Depending on the severity of their crime, they could serve on the front lines for one, three, or five years. Seventy percent died within five years on the battlefield, but any who managed to survive would then be released for good.

For now, Allen had managed to obtain his numbered tag, so he headed to the exam venue with his friends. They passed by several open doors revealing empty classrooms beyond.

These look more like middle or high school classrooms than university lecture halls. Well, I guess it makes sense since we're all around twelve years old, which would be middle school age in Japan.

The group headed down the hallways with Allen in the lead. Normally, this would be Cecil's position, as she was the noble, but with how he had confidently boarded the magic train and walked into the school building without hesitation, he was steadily assuming the role of the group's leader.

Soon, they reached their assigned classroom and took their seats. They did not have to wait long until all thirty seats were filled and for the exam to begin. Their tests were filled with questions on mathematics, language arts, and kingdom history with easy and difficult ones all mixed together.

Hmm? What year did that happen again?

Allen surreptitiously checked his notes in his grimoire.

This exam seems designed to make it difficult to get a full score. Someone who studied normally would probably only get around sixty percent right.

Memories of his university entrance exams came to mind as Allen made good progress through the questions. At the end, all of the students received one final leaf of parchment that was apparently also part of the exam. Unlike the previous problem sheet, this one had very few questions and a lot of blank space.

[redacted]

Question 1: There are three goblins and one orc. If you were a Swordsman, which would you kill first?

Allen's Answer: I would go for the three goblins first because they are easier to kill. Then I can fight the orc one-on-one. It's much easier to take hits when surrounded by four opponents, and that leads to unnecessarily wasting HP recovery items.

Question 2: An orc is about to attack a Cleric and a villager. If you were a Swordsman, which would you protect?

Allen's Answer: This depends on circumstances to some degree, but I would choose to protect the villager. The Cleric can hang on by healing

themself, during which time I could get the villager to safety. Then I could come back, effectively saving both. However, if the villager is far away and the Cleric is clearly under attack and not wearing protective armor, I would choose the one under more immediate danger or the one I am more sure of saving.

[redacted]

What's with these questions? I wonder what they're meant to test. Our ability to reason and explain our thought processes? How much we know about monsters? Our ability to make judgment calls? Or is this to screen out those with questionable morals? Who knows, maybe it's all of the above.

There were three more questions of a similar nature. Allen solved them all, and then the exam was over. Results would be posted outside the school at noon the next day, so Allen's group looked for an inn and checked in before dark.

Then the next day came.

- `Dogora: B (Passed)`
- `Cecil: A (Passed)`
- `Krena: C (Passed)`
- `Allen: S (Passed)`

Here I was, surprised at how quickly the results come back—turns out they don't release specific scores. I thought the exam was rather difficult, but turns out I got an "S." If I remember correctly, "C" is the minimum passing grade. Krena, you barely made it. The school didn't pad her grade to ensure she can get in because she's a Sword Lord, right?

Viscount Granvelle had offered to sponsor a part of Allen's tuition if he got "B" or higher on his entrance exams, but because Allen had every intention of earning a living from the dungeons in the city, he had politely but firmly turned the viscount down. It cost one gold to take the entrance exam, and one year's tuition was ten gold. In other words, at least thirty-one gold was required to graduate. When exceptional serfs managed to enroll, it was common for their feudal lord to shoulder all the fees.

"Those who passed are to gather before the school building right now."

Allen's group followed the instructions coming over the loudspeakers. According to the briefing that followed, all students were to take home a set of school uniforms according to their measurements. Furthermore, they now had to decide whether they would be living in the dorms or finding their own lodging elsewhere in the city. And lastly, they were required to register at the Adventurer's Guild before school started.

"Are we living in the dorms, Allen?" Krena asked.

During the past few days, the understanding of Allen as this group's leader had thoroughly settled in. Cecil also waited for his reply.

"Nope, we'll rent a place and live there together."
"All right." Cecil nodded. "Then we'll need to go to the Real Estate Guild now."
"Actually, I'm thinking of first going to the Adventurer's Guild to register. We can look for a place after that."
In this way, this group of four enrolled at the Academy and were now headed for the Adventurer's Guild.

Chapter 2: Gathering Information at the Adventurer's Guild

After confirming their acceptance to the Academy, Allen and his friends boarded the magic train—which cost one silver regardless of distance traveled between stations—and headed for the Adventurer's Guild.

When riding the magic ship, Allen had seen that Academy City was essentially a large circle. One train line traced the circumference of that circle while other lines ran north-south and east-west. Convenience of public transportation was not much of a concern for residents living here.

Given its name, one might expect Academy City to be mostly students, but that was apparently not the case. Maybe it was because of the numerous dungeons in the city's vicinity or simply because Allen was on the line heading toward the Adventurer's Guild, but there were a lot of adventurers also riding on their train. Soon, they came to a stop.

"This must be it," Allen said, standing in front of a five-story building bearing the same emblem as the branch in Granvelle City: a sword, staff, and shield.

"Welcome." A pretty older woman greeted them when they walked in. "How may we help you today?"

"We want to register as adventurers," Allen replied.

"Are you perhaps students?"

"Yes, our classes begin in April."

"Do you have the numbered tag you received when you passed your Appraisal?"

When the group produced their tags, they were told that students could register on the second floor. They climbed the stairs, only to be told they would have to wait a while as the counters were currently full.

Allen looked around and found the floor absolutely packed with students. In all likelihood, these were ones who had passed on some other day. Farther back in the room were ten counters designed similarly to customer service kiosks in banks in Allen's memory. Seeing as how the facilities were nicer on this floor than on the first, students seemed to be receiving rather favorable treatment, indicating the Adventurer's Guild's willingness to cooperate with Academy City.

After a while, Allen and his friends were finally called forward and invited to take their seats before one of the counters. Allen and Cecil sat at the front while Krena and Dogora took the back. One of the staff members, a woman who appeared to be in her twenties or thirties, brought over four crystals.

"To register as adventurers, each of you take one of these crystals and place your hands on it."

The children obliged, and the crystals all gave off a soft glow.

These crystal balls are used for the Appraisal Ceremonies too. I guess they're just standard for processing personal information in this world? I wonder if someone's making these?

"Next, please fill these in."

The lady then passed out sheets of parchment with fields for their names, birthplaces, Talents, and so forth. When the group had finished, the staff member retreated into another room with crystals and forms in hand.

She then returned and said, "The process for making your adventurer cards will take some time. During that time, I will now give you some basic information about being an adventurer."

Allen got out his grimoire to take notes.

- Adventurers are managed by the Adventurer's Guild
- The Guild is an organization independent of the nations
- Adventurer ranks go from "E" to "S"
- All adventurers start at Rank E
- Adventurers accept quests (e.g., from the Guild, feudal lords) to complete in order to receive rewards
- There are three kinds of quests: normal, emergency, designated
- Only adventures Rank C and higher can accept emergency and designated quests

Okay, all of this checks out with what Raven told me.

Back when Allen was eight, he had gotten acquainted with an adventurer named Raven who had taught him quite a bit about adventuring. There were a few things that Allen was hearing for the first time, but for the most part they were extensions of what he had already learned.

"And that about covers it. Do you have any questions?" the woman asked.

"I have a lot, actually," Allen answered. "Do you have time?"

"Naturally. After all, being an adventurer is dangerous. Please ask me anything you wish."

"What are the conditions for entering dungeons?"

"There are several. First, because all of you are currently Rank E, you will only be able to enter Rank C dungeons."

"What can we expect in a Rank C dungeon?"

The woman nodded and went into detail. Of course, Allen took notes:

- There are 20 dungeons within Academy City
- The breakdown of dungeon ranks: Rank C x 10, Rank B x 6, Rank A x 4
- Rank C dungeons are the most beginner friendly, containing only Rank E to C monsters

- Rank B dungeons are medium difficulty, containing Rank D to B monsters
- Rank A dungeons are the most dangerous, containing Rank C to A monsters

Below were the conditions for accessing successively ranked dungeons and ranking up as an adventurer:

- One has to reach Rank C as an adventurer to enter Rank B dungeons
- One has to reach Rank B as an adventurer to enter Rank A dungeons
- Upon doing a full run of 1 Rank C dungeon, one becomes a Rank D adventurer
- Upon doing a full run of 3 Rank C dungeons, one becomes a Rank C adventurer
- Upon doing a full run of 3 Rank B dungeons, one becomes a Rank B adventurer
- Upon doing a full run of 3 Rank A dungeons, one becomes a Rank A adventurer

I see, I see. Now it's time for the real questions.

Allen had a major goal that he wanted to achieve within his three years in Academy City. In short, he wanted to find an MP Recovery Ring.

This was the answer he had arrived at when brainstorming for ways to increase his Skill Levels even faster. He wanted to raise them as high as possible before he was to head to the battlefield in three years. As such, he needed to increase the rate at which his MP recovered.

Back when Allen had attempted to foil Cecil's kidnapping, he had been knocked out by some sort of gaseous agent. After this incident, Allen had headed to a magic tool store in search of something he could equip to gain immunity to the Sleep debuff. The storekeeper had told him that they sold nothing like that there and that he should go to a magic gear shop instead.

Allen was surprised to hear of such a store, but he found one in short order. Sure enough, the merchant there had known of what Allen sought: the Anti-Sleep Ring. However, Anti-Sleep Rings were extremely rare and almost never appeared on the open market. Whenever they showed up once in a blue moon, they would be snatched up almost immediately by royals, nobles, or tycoons looking to protect themselves. Due to this, it was said that they could only be found in the royal capital and Academy City. Allen had asked the price for reference and was told that the market price for one Anti-Sleep Ring was a hundred gold.

Since he was there, Allen had also asked about a ring that helped recover MP. However, the store owner said he had never heard of such an item. Instead, he had heard of an *HP* Recovery Ring before—an accessory

that would heal someone as long as they had it on. One had been found in Academy City long, long ago. The merchant was not sure, but if one were available nowadays, it would be worth a thousand gold at least.

Despite what the store owner had said, however, Allen figured that if HP Recovery Rings existed, so did MP Recovery Rings.

Pushing thoughts of the rings out of his head, Allen asked the Guild staff, "I've heard that you can find precious items in the dungeons. How exactly do they appear?"

"Here are the two ways you can expect to encounter items in a dungeon."

- There are treasure chests scattered all throughout
- When the boss on the lowest floor is defeated, a treasure chest will appear

"Hmm... How many floors can we expect for each dungeon rank? Also, roughly how long would it take to proceed through a dungeon if we don't get lost?"

"It's different for each rank."

- Rank C dungeons have 4 to 6 floors
- Rank B dungeons have 10 to 12 floors
- Rank A dungeons have 15 to 20 floors
- Rank C dungeons require around 6 hours for each floor
- Rank B dungeons require around 12 hours for each floor
- Rank A dungeons require around 24 hours for each floor

In other words, even the easiest dungeon could take twenty-four hours to clear.

"They sound very spacious," Allen said. "By the way, I've heard that an HP Recovery Ring was found in Academy City. Is that true?"

"I'm surprised you've heard of that. It's true that someone found it in a dungeon once. It's said that it was dropped by a Rank A dungeon boss seventy years ago."

Ugh, that's before the Demon Lord strengthened all the world's monsters, which means it's a lot harder to do the same thing now. But, oh no... Just the thought of searching for a rare drop in a dungeon is making my heart race.

Thanks to the Demon Lord, every monster was now one rank stronger than officially designated. Consequently, dungeons were much more dangerous. The boss of a Rank A dungeon was presumably Rank A, making it effectively Rank S in fighting strength. Killing it was beyond Allen's and his companions' capabilities at the moment, but Allen now had confirmation that there was a possibility of obtaining an MP Recovery Ring. This alone made it worth coming to Academy City.

With the previous topic concluded, Allen said, "I still have more questions. May I?"

"O-Of course," the woman stammered, slightly weirded out by the boy.

Although another staff member had already carried Allen and his friends' adventurer cards over, Allen was nowhere near finished with asking all the questions he had. Cecil and the others had no choice but to quietly listen as Allen and the lady continued talking earnestly.

"Do monsters in dungeons drop magic stones?"

"Yes, they do. Ah, I should say this ahead of time: you are only able to obtain magic stones from dungeon monsters, to be exact."

"So their bodies don't remain?"

"That is correct. If you need monster materials, you will have to head to the forest or mountains a few days' walk from Academy City. There are both Rank C and B monsters in the area."

"Understood." Allen now shifted from asking questions as an adventurer to asking questions as a quest giver. "I am currently gathering Rank D magic stones. If I were to issue a quest, is there an upper limit to how many I could request?"

"How many are you thinking?"

"At least two million."

"I'm sorry, t-two *million*?!"

Dogora and Cecil were equally surprised. The former cried, "Hold on, two million?!" as the latter rounded on Allen with, "What do you mean by two million?!" Krena was the only one who did not seem to quite get what was going on.

"That is the number I want to gradually work toward," Allen explained, "but I'm thinking of asking for ten thousand each time. I currently have a hundred gold—can I register the quest right now?"

He produced a bag of a hundred gold coins that made a heavy clunk as it thudded onto the counter.

"O-Of course. There is a large supply of magic stones here in Academy City. However, I'm afraid it would take a while to meet those numbers..."

As Rank D magic stones normally went for one silver apiece, ten thousand of them would be worth a hundred gold. The staff explained that the guild processing fee was ten percent. *I guess it makes sense for the middleman to take a cut,* Allen thought as he stacked ten more gold coins next to the bag.

"Roughly how long do you think it will take?"

"Well...a week should be enough, I believe."

Before coming to Academy City, Allen had tried placing the same quest at the Adventurer's Guild in Granvelle City but was told gathering ten thousand would be nigh impossible. In the first place, the Granvelle fiefdom was facing a slight shortage of Rank D magic stones thanks to Allen practically decimating the realm's goblin population. In contrast, Academy City housed twenty dungeons, every last one filled with monsters. As long as

he provided the gold, there would be plenty of monsters to kill and plenty of adventurers to go kill them. Allen intended on pushing the limit of how many magic stones he could obtain throughout the three years he would be spending in this city.

Good, that's about everything I wanted to ask and do here. All that's left is to visit a dungeon in person. If I have anything else to ask after that, I can just come here again.

"Do you have any other questions?"

"No, that is enough. Thank you very much."

"In that case, here are your adventurer cards."

With a wry smile and a shrug, the lady handed over four jet-black plaques the size of business cards. They bore each person's name and rank in silver font.

The color theme of my grimoire and the Appraisal Ceremony display are also silver text on black. Are the gods of this world purposely sticking to a design? Not that I mind, though; I actually appreciate the sense of uniformity.

"Thank you for the cards. Is there anything else we have to do for the registration process?"

"One last thing: would all of you here be registering as a party?"

Oh right, that's a thing. I guess we might as well.

Allen recalled Raven telling him about the system where adventurers who often worked together officially registered as a group referred to as a party. Adventurers in parties were seen as more trustworthy and would therefore receive more designated quests. Although Allen had no intention of accepting such quests, he figured it would not hurt to register.

"Yes, please."

"Have you decided on a name for your party?"

Allen looked at Cecil, to which she responded, "You decide for us."

Upon seeing Krena and Dogora nod agreement, Allen turned back to the staff. "Please write us down as 'No-life Gamers.'"

"What does that mean?" Cecil asked, her curiosity piqued at the unfamiliar phrase.

"A no-life gamer is someone who thoroughly masters the path they choose. It is a title only for those who dedicate everything they have to dive as deep as they can into something."

"That sounds pretty impressive. Sure, let's go with that."

Allen nodded. "Then No-life Gamers it is. Miss, please register us."

"Understood. Please wait a short while—this will not take long."

The staff member stood up and headed to the back again. Allen turned to his friends and lowered his head. "I'm sorry for taking up so much of everyone's time."

Cecil waved a hand dismissively. "It's fine. We also learned a lot thanks to you. So, what are we going to do after this?"

“It’s gotten quite late already. How about we go look for a property first thing tomorrow?”

“Sounds good to me. After we decide on a place, let’s all discuss what we’ll do going forward,” Cecil said, looking at Krena and Dogora in turn.

“‘What we’ll do’?” Krena parroted, tilting her head. “Allen, what does that—”

“That’s right, Krena,” Allen nodded. “We have a goal for the coming three years. I’ll go into more details after we first get a hou—”

Whoosh!

“Wah! A big book!” Krena exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as she reached for the grimoire that had suddenly appeared in front of the group.

Wait, what?! Allen looked down at the cover and saw new lines of silver text.

`<Krena has joined your party.>`

`<Cecil Granvelle has joined your party.>`

`<Dogora has joined your party.>`

Oh...

“What’s with this book that suddenly appeared?” Cecil asked, somewhat calmer than the others. She turned to Allen, who looked entirely unsurprised at the phenomenon. “Explain, Allen.”

There’s no doubting it—they can totally see my grimoire. Oh, heck yeah! Wait, could it be... Allen opened the book without paying his friends any attention. Their Statuses are here! Yes, my four months of praying have paid off!

Right after Allen’s own Status page, three new pages had been added in. Allen looked for another letter from the gods, but there was none this time. Finally feeling everyone’s stares boring into him, he smiled sheepishly and said, “Um, I’ll tell you all about it when things settle down, okay?”

Just as Allen managed to placate his friends, the staff returned. After the party registration was complete and the quest for ten thousand Rank D magic stones had been processed, the group left the building with the intention of looking for a house the next morning.

□ □ □

The next morning, Allen and his friends visited the Real Estate Guild.

“Welcome. How may we help you today?”

Hmm, they’re still treating us courteously even though we’re showing up as a group of four children. Is this how it’s like everywhere in Academy City?

The service level here was markedly different from that of Krena Village. Just like at the Adventurer’s Guild, a staff member guided them to a counter.

“What kind of a property are you looking for?”

“A single house large enough for five or six people, please. Preferably close to multiple dungeons and a magic train station, with easy access to

the Academy," Allen replied with the casualness of asking for a place in Tokyo near a train station and a convenience store.

"I see, I see," the staff replied, taking down notes on a parchment while flipping through what looked like a catalog of properties.

After returning from the Adventurer's Guild, Allen and his friends had shared what they each wanted from the property. Just in case, Allen had also stressed the point that they would be living together as both boys and girls, but everyone confirmed they had no issues with the arrangement. After all, he had lived in the same house as Cecil for four years now and had even slept with Krena in the same room when they were younger. Dogora, for his part, simply went, "I see."

"In regard to the dungeon requirement," the staff asked, "would Rank C suffice?"

"It would be even better if there were Rank B and Rank A ones close by as well."

The sound of flipping pages continued for a short while longer.

"Hmm...the ones that fit that condition are mainly located along the major avenues running through the areas where dungeons are clustered together."

Tell me more; that sounds perfect.

Cecil also seemed satisfied. "That sounds like what we're looking for," she said.

"However, those properties are all quite large..."

To sum up the staff's explanation, those wanting to challenge higher-ranked dungeons normally did so in parties of twenty to fifty people. Consequently, the closest properties were all rather sizable. None were small enough to house only five to six.

"We don't mind the size," Allen said. "Prioritize the other conditions, please."

"In that case, here is one for twenty."

That might work. Let's give it a visit.

Allen proposed seeing the property in person first before making a decision. The other three expressed their agreement. The staff then escorted them onto a magic train and brought them before the house.

"Here it is," the staff said. "What do you think?"

Allen nodded. "It is indeed close to the station. Which way are the dungeons?"

This prompted the staff to go into detail regarding the location and features of the building. Allen listened to her while sending a Bird E into the air to confirm the specific locations of the nearby dungeons for himself.

Is that three-story building a dungeon? It really is close by, and so is the train station. I see quite a lot of eateries nearby too.

No one in the party knew how to cook except for Allen, who had only learned the most basic of basics from the head chef during his time as a

manservant. Besides, he was hardly going to waste time cooking multiple meals for everyone when there were dungeons right in front of his nose.

Well, gamers who cook for themselves aren't real gamers. They wouldn't have the time.

Without further ado, the group walked through the heavy front doors into the house. It was a large, three-story building with a yard.

"The first and second floors of this property have ten bedrooms each. What's more, there is an underground area as well."

On the first floor was a common room, parlor, two bathrooms, and two toilets. This city had a proper sewage system, so the toilets were flushable and the baths were drainable, with taps installed that drew water heated by magic stones. The basement served as both an armory and a storage area for items found in the dungeons.

"The monthly rent for this place is ten gold, you said?" Allen asked.

"That is correct, yes," the staff member confirmed.

Allen turned to his friends. "What do you think, guys? This place works for me."

Dogora looked somewhat anxious at hearing the price of ten gold a month but stayed silent. Allen told the staff lady that they would be taking the place, so they returned to the Guild to fill out the necessary paperwork and ended up receiving the key that same day. On their way back to their new home, the group bought dinner and the bare minimum in daily necessities.

They gathered in the first-floor common room to eat their dinner.

"Now that we have a base of operations, let's talk about what we'll be doing here in Academy City," Allen said, giving Cecil a look. She nodded.

"Meaning?" Dogora prompted.

"There's something that Lady Cecil and I will be working toward over the next three years," Allen replied. "To that end, there is some important information that we need to share with you. Please listen while we eat."

And so Allen divulged the full details of Demon Lord history. Everything that the magic tutor taught him, he now imparted to Dogora and Krena—from the international effort against the Demon Lord to the true purpose of the Academy. It took about an hour with him speaking slowly.

"And that is why Lady Cecil will have to go to the battlefield three years from now; it's her duty as a noble. And Krena, you'll have to go too."

"Huh? Me too?"

Apparently Academy students learned Demon Lord history in their second year after the summer holiday, although only those who completed the assignment over the break—clearing a dungeon—were taught. The students at Nobles College in the royal capital also learned about it around the same time during their second year. As a general rule, Nobles College never failed any students, so everyone enrolled there would come to learn Demon Lord history and what the noble duty was.

When Allen finished speaking, Dogora asked with a pensive face, “And you’ll be fighting to protect Lady Cecil?”

“No, that’s not correct,” Allen replied just as Cecil nodded.

She immediately whirled on him. “What do you mean by that?!”

“I won’t be fighting to *protect* her. I’ll be fighting *with* her, and we’ll be defeating the Demon Lord,” Allen said in full seriousness.

Krena laughed. “That sounds just like something you’d say, Allen!”

“That’s fine with you too, right, Krena? Let’s fight the Demon Lord Army together.”

“Sure!”

Seeing Krena’s bright smile, Cecil fell silent. Although she had been surprised to find herself co-opted into a Demon Lord-killing task force, she understood Allen enough to know this was just how he was. Allen turned to the other boy.

“What do you plan to do, Dogora?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Will you join us in fighting the Demon Lord and become a champion? Or will you enter the service of some noble and become their knight?”

“A champion or a knight, huh?”

“I described everything rather casually, but to be honest with you, I expect the fighting to be very dangerous and demanding. That’s why I won’t force you—you should make your own choice. Of course, not going to the battlefield after spending these three years with us is a totally valid choice too.”

“Nah, I’m going,” Dogora replied, crossing his arms and smiling. He looked up at the ceiling as if his worldview had just expanded. “Who’d have thought? Turns out wanting to be a knight was just a tiny dream...”



“So, what’re we going to do now?” Krena asked.

“There are several things.” Allen raised a finger. “First, we’ll be going through the dungeons so that we can all overcome multiple Trials of the Gods *and* get some better gear.”

“I see,” Dogora nodded.

“Also, I want to expand our party. Specifically, I want to find a Cleric.”

“A Cleric?” Cecil started as understanding dawned. “Ahh, because we don’t have anyone to heal us?”

Allen thought that their party now needed a dedicated healer. Although he had Grass-type Summons, using them burned through his magic stones, which he wanted to avoid if possible.

“So to that end, the second thing we’ll do is look for someone with a healing Talent, either at school or at the Adventurer’s Guild, and have them join our party.”

“By the way, what was with you asking about some ring and requesting a ton of magic stones at the Guild?” Cecil asked. “Oh, and tell us about that big book too.”

Yep, this seems like a good time to share everything.

“I’m saying this ahead of time, but I grow much slower than all of you. That’s why I almost failed the entrance exam the other day.”

“What’re you talking about? I’ve seen you fight. You’re way stronger than all of us.”

Allen responded by talking about how he had been burdened with the Trials of a hundred people and that, in order to overcome those Trials, he needed an overwhelming number of magic stones and MP Recovery Rings. Furthermore, he explained that his grimoire was a part of his abilities as a Summoner.

“You were doing all that while staying at my mansion?! But…Trials of a hundred people?! That just sounds impossible!” Cecil exclaimed.

In contrast, Krena said understandingly, “I see, so that’s why you’ve always been working so hard.”

“Huh?” Allen looked surprised at how easily Krena accepted what he said. She had been watching him closely throughout their childhood, much more than he had thought.

Dogora just nodded once.

Allen looked at each of his companion’s faces, then concluded, “This is why we will be very busy in the three years to come.”

In this way, Allen and his friends secured a house in Academy City and came to share a common goal for their coming years at the Academy.

Chapter 3: School Life and Dungeon Delving

School was in session for four out of the six days that made up each week, with the remaining two days off. In light of this, Allen and his friends took to buying daily necessities on their way back from school on school days so they could dedicate two whole days each week to go dungeon delving.

Allen footed the bill for everyone's starting gear. He was shouldering the initial investment, but they expected to get their hands on better gear from the dungeon itself. This was not meant as an exchange, but he did ask whether he could use the money they earned from the dungeon for buying magic stones to train his Skill Levels. Everyone readily agreed.

On the first day of school, the group of four headed to the board in front of the school building. The examinee numbers that had been posted the other day had been replaced with class rosters. They looked for their own numbers, then headed to their classrooms.

Looks like about three thousand students got in.

In terms of college exams from Allen's previous life, getting enrolled at the Ratashian Academy was about as difficult as a moderately high-tier university. There were thirty students per class and a hundred first-year classes.

Only three thousand out of twenty thousand applicants. They sure whittled down the numbers.

The signatories of the Five Continent Alliance were hardly one monolithic force. Each country within each continent had their own designs and considerations. The ones feeling the greatest sense of crisis were, understandably, the three countries that had been directly attacked by the Demon Lord Army: the Empire of Giamut on the Central Continent, the dwarven Empire of Baukis to the northwest, and the elven country Rohzenheim in the northeast.

Conversely, there were many countries located on those same continents but not on the front lines, with the Kingdom of Ratash being one example. The two southern continents had yet to see the banners of the Demon Lord Army firsthand, though it was not clear if this was because this world was not a globe or if the Army did not know how to cross over into the southern continents.

Consequently, it was difficult to expect every country to feel the same sense of urgency regarding the threat. The nations that felt the safest were the most hesitant to send their Talented citizens to contribute to the war effort. After all, those with Talents, especially battle-related ones, were valuable assets. Powered-up monsters threatened cities regardless of borders, and extracting magic stones and items from dungeons was as vital

to national interest as excavating precious metals and oil was on Earth. Understandably, countries wanted to hold on to their Talented as much as possible.

Due to the insistence of these southern and central countries—excluding Giamut, of course—the Alliance had eventually settled on conscripting only members of royal and noble families. It was their duty to protect the common people in the first place, or so the argument went. If commoners were conscripted too, that would mean drafting tens of thousands of Talented; if just the aristocracy, then only hundreds. The preferable option was obvious. Naturally, sending only a few hundred commoners instead would be out of the question. Such an exception would render the moral justification for sending fewer people moot.

As Allen settled into his seat, the Five Continent Alliance on his mind, his classmates-to-be also grabbed their own. Everyone had their own way of waiting for the lesson to start. Some seemed to have come from the same village and were merrily chatting away. There was even one student who appeared to be fighting off sleep.

Suddenly, the sliding door clattered open. A man, most likely their teacher, walked in. He looked to be in his forties and had a crew cut. The phrase "rough and tumble" seemed insufficient to do him justice—he was so muscular, he seemed at risk of bursting through his uniform.

"You're all here. Good," their teacher said as he stood at the podium and scanned the room. "The name's Carlova. I'll be your homeroom teacher for the next three years. I'll kick things off by telling you a bit about myself."

The man's appearance was so impressive that all the students listened attentively without interrupting.

"Normally, I'm the guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild in the royal capital. My Talent is Sword Master. When I was still an adventurer, the highest rank I reached was A. The Academy hired me because they heard a Sword Lord was enrolling this year."

Carlova scratched his head and shrugged his shoulders. Apparently he had been transferred to this post for the next three years on Krena's account.

So, the Guild makes arrangements like this too. I heard that it's supposed to be independent of the kingdom, but what about the Five Continent Alliance? If the Guild obliged a transfer request like this, that means they're at least cooperative, right?

Allen thought back to the courteous attitude of the Guild staff who had handled their adventurer card registration.

"Me being your homeroom teacher means that I'm responsible for you now. I also teach swordsmanship, so if you've got a sword fighting Talent, I'll see ya in your practicals."

Carlova then went on to give a simple rundown of the coming year's curriculum. The students would have general education classes in the morning, while practical lessons geared toward developing their respective

Talents were during the afternoon. That meant spear training for Spear Users, sword training for Swordsmen, and so on and so forth. He then passed out copies of a parchment that listed instructors and training grounds by Talent.

"Ah, that's right. You'll have end-of-semester exams in July and February. If you make lower than a forty, you fail. Make sure you study." Carlova looked around. "You. You're Allen, right?"

Hm? He knows of me? Well, I guess it's hard to mistake black hair. "Yes, sir."

"Apparently your exam score broke records. You made history. Good on you."

"I'm sorry?"

The entire class turned around to look at Allen, who was sitting in the back.

"Don't you go studying all by yourself. If you wanna graduate with the rest of your class, you better spend some time teaching your friends too."

Uh...he's talking about Krena, isn't he? Hold on, so they did pad her grades to make sure she got in?!

Krena, who was sitting next to Allen, gave him a look of pure respect. She clearly did not catch the implication behind what the teacher had said.

"O-Of course, sir. I'll do my best."

"Good. Now, as I'm sure most of you have caught on, there are serfs, commoners, and nobles together in this class. Your social statuses may be different, but here at the Academy, you're all students. So, drop the formal speech when talking with each other. Learn to get along."

In this school, both aristocratic students lording their nobility over others and commoners or serfs acting obsequious would be reprimanded. The class, which had been quietly listening until now, burst into a low buzz of whispers.

Cecil was currently sitting behind Allen. Without turning around, he said to her, "So, *Cecil*, looks like we're to drop the formalities."

The way Allen immediately complied without any hesitation whatsoever left Cecil at a complete loss for words. Her silence prompted Allen to ask, "Hm? What's the matter, *Cecil*?"

Krena joined in."What's wrong, Cecil?"

"Eurgh!"

Upon being repeatedly addressed without a title, Cecil leaped up without warning and snaked her arms around Allen's neck into a choke hold.

"How can you switch to speaking to me so casually that easily, Allen?! Does this mean you haven't been mentally respecting me all this time?!"

"Huh?! Ughh..."

Th-This is a self-defense move she learned at the mansion, isn't it? It's just like her to suddenly use it without warning. Th-This is pretty rough. C'mon, do your thing, Endurance. I know you can do a lot better than this.

Although Allen had leveled up and raised his Endurance, he had a feeling the stat was not quite pulling its weight in his everyday life. In fact, he thought Attack also seemed somewhat low; perhaps this was an effect to prevent stats interfering with normal life.

“Go on, say it. What have you been calling me inside your mind all this time? Just ‘Cecil,’ right?” Cecil whispered furiously.

Carefully choosing his words, Allen forced his words out through the chokehold. “It’s been ‘Lady Cecil,’ o-of course. How could you suspect otherwise? I respect you from the bottom of my heart every moment of every single day. It truly pains my heart that the school is forcing me to do this.”

Carlova cleared his throat and said wryly, “Uh, you two back there. I know I said to get along, but I didn’t mean for you to get *that* close...”





When Carlova finished explaining everything, the class moved to the auditorium where the entrance ceremony would be held. This school had, among other buildings, several auditoriums and open squares, all of which were remarkably spacious. The students from the second and third years were also present at the ceremony, both groups wearing slightly different uniforms. As it turned out, the design changed with every year.

Allen had not seen the Hero or the headmaster, who had mentioned the Sovereign of Spirits or some such, since exam day. He figured that they would summon him or seek him out of their own accord if they needed him for anything.

One thing that Allen had learned from the Appraisal Ceremony was that the Hero was in Normal Mode. Furthermore, the headmaster, who had supposedly seen the Appraisal results of tens of thousands of students, had never seen anyone with all their stats ranked “E.” In other words, it was highly likely that Allen was the only person in this world who was in Hell Mode.

And with that, classes began. The first course was called Monster Studies, which started off covering the ecology and behaviors of goblins and orcs. It was truly a class befitting a fantasy world. The teacher went on passionately about each monster’s weaknesses, how to kill them, and what to watch out for while fighting them.

Afternoon classes were based on each student’s Talent. Naturally, there was no Summoner course. When Allen consulted Carlova, he was told there was no curriculum by which he would be tested, so he was free to join whichever class he was interested in. He decided to check all of them out, starting with swordsmanship and magic. There were classes only four days each week, which Allen thought was a rather leisurely schedule.

The morning of the fifth day, Allen and his friends departed bright and early to head to their very first dungeon. As they were still Rank E adventurers, they could only choose a Rank C dungeon. As they approached the entrance, they saw a whole line of adventurers already out front. Apparently it would get crowded at this hour. Some groups were pulling carts loaded with their luggage. In contrast, Allen and his friends had all their hands free, thanks to the Storage function of his grimoire.

“It’s the dungeon!” Krena exclaimed excitedly.

“It sure is!” Allen replied, the grin on his face equally as dazzling as hers.

Cecil stared at them in turn. “What do the two of you look so happy for?!”

Dogora, as usual, merely looked on in silence.

This looks like a three-story building...which seems quite short, considering the lady at the Guild said that Rank C dungeons usually have

four to six floors. That's a rather awkward height if the dungeon is going up...so does that mean it's underground?

After a while, it was finally the No-life Gamers' turn in line.

"You appear to be students. Do you have your adventurer cards with you?" the staff member on duty asked, to which all four children then produced their cards. He nodded and said, "Looks like you've got yourselves proper equipment too. That's good. You be careful in there."

All together, it had cost two hundred gold to gear everyone up. A hundred went toward a mithril ax and greatsword—Krena had gotten really excited at seeing the giant sword—leaving the remaining hundred for Cecil's Ancient Wood Wand and three sets of protective gear. Now, Allen only had two hundred gold remaining.

Allen told the staff member, "It's our first time here today. Do we just go straight in?"

"Oh, first time! In that case, go to Room 205. You can ask all your questions there."

"Y-Yes, sir. Understood."

"Room 205"? What, is this actually an apartment building and not a dungeon? And what does he mean by "ask questions"?

Allen had figured that they would be fine with adequate gear and a general idea of the strength of the monsters they would encounter. As it turned out, however, there was more that he had yet to learn.

The second floor was accessible both by stairs and by ramp. Allen and his friends followed behind another group that was pulling a cart along. When they reached the landing, they walked down the corridor until they found the door labeled "205." They pushed their way inside and, to their surprise, found a cube roughly a meter across floating in midair in the middle of the room. It was blinking red, green, yellow, and other colors while giving off soft mechanical clicks.

`"Please close the door after you come in,"` said a robotic voice like the kind featured in older anime.

Krena jumped and exclaimed, "Whoa, it talked!"

The group obediently closed the door after themselves and gathered before the cube.

`"Please present your adventurer cards."`

There was no point in staying surprised, so Allen held out his card, prompting his friends to follow suit.

`"Rank E adventurer Allen, Rank E adventurer Krena, Rank E adventurer Cecil, and Rank E adventurer Dogora. Is this correct?"`

"Yes," Allen said on behalf of his party.

`"Welcome to this Rank C dungeon. I am General Dungeon Operating System C205."`

Interesting. Still haven't the faintest idea how this works, but it sure is a fancy setup.

“Do we enter the dungeon from this room?”

“That is correct. I will transport you to the dungeon, which is in a separate dimension.”

“A separate dimension? You mean the dungeon’s on a different server?”

In Allen’s previous life, he had often played games hosted on multiple servers that players could freely move between. For example, if a certain town, hunting area, or dungeon was particularly crowded, players could access the same area through a different server. This term suddenly popping up in Allen’s mind gave him the uncanny feeling of living within a computer game in person.

“A server, is it? I’m afraid that word is not in my data bank.”

“I see. Don’t worry about it; I only meant to say that I understand the thing about different dimensions. Please send us to the dungeon, then.”

“Understood. However, according to your adventurer cards, this seems to be your first time entering a dungeon. Would you like me to give you a brief explanation beforehand?”

Since I’m here with everyone else, I probably ought to listen, just in case there are things I should know.

“Yes, please.”

As Allen and GDOS C205 continued their conversation, Krena watched excitedly while Cecil visibly struggled to understand how he could talk with a cube as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“The dimension you are sent to changes depending on who you are with and the number of the room you are entering from. Other adventurers will be unable to follow you. This also means help cannot arrive, so please prepare thoroughly beforehand.”

“That sounds exactly like going to separate servers! More like, these are instanced dungeons!” *So I can use my Summons as much as I want! Thank you so much, gods!*

“S-Seriously, what’s been with you all this time?!”

“Do you not get it, Cecil?! The cube is saying everyone’s playing on different servers! Different instances!”

“Oh no... I’ve always thought you were a bit strange, but it looks like you’ve gone completely mad...”

Allen then continued to ask a few more questions, such as how to return, whether they needed to watch out for traps, how to head to different floors, and what the conditions for clearing the dungeon were. As it turned out, the boss of a Rank C dungeon was, as could be expected, a Rank C monster. Aside from the boss, all other monsters within were either Rank E or D.

When the cube finished explaining, Allen asked it to go ahead and send them to the dungeon. It wished them luck and obliged.

All at once, the appearance of the room shifted. Its size remained the same and C205 was still there, but a path had opened up.

“Is that the entrance to the dungeon?” Krena asked.

“Most likely,” Dogora answered, hefting his ax.

“All right, everyone,” Allen said. “Let’s go.”

Everyone nodded, then stepped out into the dungeon.

□ □ □

The party of four proceeded through the first floor of the dungeon while taking care to remain in formation. Krena and Dogora led the way, Cecil stayed in the middle, and Allen brought up the rear. They had discussed and worked out this formation at their base beforehand.

Soon, they came upon a fork in the road.

“Which way do we go?” Cecil asked.

“The right leads to a dead end. Let’s take the left,” Allen replied. *This is quite the labyrinth, even though it’s just a Rank C dungeon.*

The moment they had stepped inside, Allen had sent out four Bird Es ahead for scouting. Thanks to them, the group could confidently push ahead without worry of getting lost.

Krena, who did not quite get what was going on, cried, “Allen’s amazing!”

This specific dungeon was composed of lots of small rooms connected by winding passages. In order to head to the next floor, they had to find the cube managing the floor and have it teleport them. Just like with armored ant nests, Allen was currently creating a map of this dungeon floor. He wanted to find the shortest way through.

“Let’s only fight monsters when we’ve got no other choice and ignore the treasure chests altogether,” Allen suggested. “We’re better off prioritizing clearing three Rank C dungeons so we can enter Rank B dungeons as soon as possible.”

The cube had told them that some treasure chests were actually monsters in disguise, while others could fire arrows or spray poison when opened. No one in this party knew how to disable traps, and drops from chests in Rank C dungeons were likely nothing impressive anyway. Given all this, Allen decided to just pass everything by. Everyone indicated their agreement.

There were several things Allen wanted to accomplish in these dungeons. He wanted to raise his and his friends’ levels, of course, plus earn some cash and magic stones. However, the monsters in Rank C dungeons were so weak that trying to earn money or levels from them would be just plain inefficient. Furthermore, he wanted to get his hands on an MP Recovery Ring, which could, supposedly, only drop from a Rank A dungeon boss. As he had no idea which specific dungeon, he wanted to earn the right to challenge the Rank A dungeons as quickly as possible. This would also widen the range of monsters the party could encounter. For all these reasons, he was now focusing solely on completing speedruns of Rank C dungeons.

All right, let’s first take a good look at everyone’s Statuses.

Allen looked through his grimoire while walking on. The moment the party had been registered, he had gained the ability to see his party members' info.

[redacted]

Name: Krena
Age: 12
Class: Sword Lord
Level: 21
HP: 880
MP: 330
Attack: 880
Endurance: 620
Agility: 595
Intelligence: 350
Luck: 415
Skills: Sword Lord {1}, Slash {1}, Sword Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Limit Break
XP: 2,850/3,000
Skill LevelsSword Lord: 1
Slash: 1

[redacted]

Skill ExperienceSlash: 0/10Name: Cecil Granvelle
Age: 12
Class: Wizardess
Level: 1
HP: 25
MP: 25
Attack: 10
Endurance: 16
Agility: 16
Intelligence: 30
Luck: 16
Skills: Wizardry {1}, Fire Magic {1}, Sparring {2}
Extra Skill: Petit Meteor
XP: 0/10
Skill LevelsWizardry: 1
Fire Magic: 1

[redacted]

Skill ExperienceFire Magic: 10/10Name: Dogora
Age: 12
Class: Ax User
Level: 21
HP: 464
MP: 248

Attack: 610
Endurance: 404
Agility: 258
Intelligence: 170
Luck: 276
Skills: War Ax {1}, Full Might {1}, Ax Mastery {4}
Extra Skill: Heart and Soul
XP: 2,850/3,000
Skill LevelsWar Ax: 1
Full Might: 1
Skill ExperienceFull Might: 0/10
[redacted]

Allen had long finished analyzing his companions' Statuses. First, as he had deduced, all classes had a fundamental skill tied to their class, the equivalent of what Summoning was to him. He personally called these "class skills." For Krena, this would be Sword Lord, whereas for Cecil, it would be Wizardry.

Although Cecil had earned some Skill XP, her skill had yet to level up. The magic tutor had said that in order to use more powerful magic, one had to overcome Trials of the Gods. Allen planned on observing her Status to figure out exactly how base level and skill level were connected.

Why Krena and Dogora's skill levels had remained at Lvl. 1 was likely because they had not expended their MP at all during their playing knight sessions. It could also be said that, until now, they had not been in an environment where they could use their skills.

Allen had shown everyone his grimoire. When he told Krena she had a skill named Slash, she had said she thought she could somehow imagine it. Allen was hoping that everyone's afternoon classes would help them activate their skills.

"Cecil, slime up ahead."

"I see it. Fireball!"

Even while in the middle of thought, Allen was still scouting ahead. When the slime he had spotted earlier came into sight, Cecil attacked it with her magic.

<You have defeated 1 slime. You have earned 8 XP.>

"Yay!" Cecil cheered after killing her very first monster.

"Thanks," Allen told her. "You're doing great."

Just like Krena and Dogora, Allen now spoke more casually with Cecil. She had gotten used to it by this point and had not brought it up since that first day.

Half of the slime had been blown away by Cecil's spell. The remaining half gave off some smoke, then disappeared altogether, leaving behind only a small magic stone. This was just as the Guild staff had said—dungeon

monsters only dropped magic stones, no materials. To save the time and effort of picking the magic stones up, Allen assigned a Bird G with the task.

I've gotta stock up on Rank E magic stones too, for making Leaves of Life.

The party had agreed to let Allen manage their magic stones. As for his current stock, he had 2,746 Rank E stones; 6,953 Rank D; 9,157 Rank C; and 4 Rank B. Although he used to have over twenty thousand Rank D ones at one point, he had spent the majority of them making Crops of Magic. Since many of the Rank D Summons were quite useful, he held on to the remaining stones as insurance.

At the moment, Allen had two hundred gold on hand. Two more quests from the Adventurer's Guild to gather twenty thousand Rank D magic stones and he would be pretty much penniless. It would be a while before he had a stable source of money flowing in, and no matter how many Rank E magic stones he gathered, they would never count as Rank D stones.

And so Allen had turned his attention to his Rank C magic stones.

- `The Value of Each Rank of Magic Stone`
- `Rank E magic stone: almost worthless`
- `Rank D magic stone: 1 silver`
- `Rank C magic stone: 10 silver`
- `Rank B magic stone: 1 gold`
- `Rank A magic stone: 10 gold`

The monetary value of magic stones increased tenfold with each successive rank. This was in proportion to their energy output, with a higher-ranked stone providing ten times more energy than the previous rank. While monsters were often much more than ten times stronger than monsters one rank below them, the price of magic stones was apparently tied to how much energy they could provide when powering magic tools.

Currently, Allen owned more than nine thousand Rank C magic stones. He was planning on selling them in batches of one thousand each to fund his Rank D magic stone gathering. Although he would undoubtedly need Rank C magic stones in the future, his top priority at the moment was leveling Summoning up.

With a few breaks in between, the No-life Gamers finally reached the cube at the other end of the floor before the end of day.

"There it is!" Cecil cried out happily. "Now we can go to the next floor!" Despite having taken ten hours to reach this point, her exhaustion had cleared away after each level up, meaning she was still feeling quite energetic. Due to being in Normal Mode, she had been leveling up quite quickly only fighting Rank E monsters.

`"I am Floor Operating System C328-01. Do you wish to exit the dungeon? Or do you wish to go to the next floor?"`

"Would we be able to return if we go to the next floor?" Allen asked.

“Floor Operating System C328-02 is on the next floor. It can take you out of the dungeon. Furthermore, should you choose not to continue on to the next floor, you will not be able to start from Floor 2 the next time you enter this dungeon.”

Ah, so it basically saves our progress and lets us start where we left off. That’s helpful.

“Please send us to the next level, then.”

“Understood.”

The appearance of the room changed instantaneously. Apparently this was now the second floor.

“Welcome. I am Floor Operating System C328-02. Do you plan on staying in the dungeon? Or do you wish to exit?”

“Please return us— Ah, hold on.”

Allen took out a stick of firewood from Storage and threw it to the floor. Then he Summoned a Bird G and ordered it to stand by in the room.

“What’re you doing, Allen?” Dogora asked curiously.

“Experiment,” Allen replied simply.

Dogora still looked confused. He studied the firewood as if trying to glean its significance.

Allen turned to the cube. “Okay, please return us outside.”

“Understood.”

Immediately, Allen and his friends found themselves in another room with a door behind them. No floating cube was in sight.

“So this is the designated exit room.”

“S-So it seems,” Cecil replied, somewhat on her guard after all the back-to-back teleportations.

The group walked down a corridor, then stepped outside to find themselves on the opposite side of the dungeon building from the entrance.

So ended the No-life Gamers’ very first day in a dungeon.

□ □ □

Some time had passed since the No-life Gamers began heading to the dungeons regularly. During this time, Allen had made several major discoveries. One of them had been tied to the firewood that he had left behind on the first day.

When he first heard the cube say that the dungeon they were sent to was based on who was in their party and where they had entered from, and that other adventurers would be unable to follow or rescue them, Allen’s first thought was that he could use his Summons freely without worrying about strangers seeing. As he continued going through the dungeon, however, another possibility had occurred to him.

What triggered this thought was the small size of Room 205. Twenty people could fit inside if they really squished, but the real estate agent had mentioned adventurer parties of up to fifty people. This led Allen to deduce that it was possible for such parties to enter the room in smaller groups and

regroup again inside a dungeon. This implied that when a party “logged back into” the dungeon, it was the exact same instance as before.

In order to test this hypothesis, Allen had left behind a stick of firewood and a Summon. Lo and behold, on the second day when he returned to the dungeon, both were waiting exactly where he had left them. In other words, the dungeon was generating an infinite number of dimensions for different adventurer parties and different rooms.

I’d heard that these dungeons existed from before the appearance of the Demon Lord. I wonder who’s managing them?

The General Dungeon Operating System had also given them two pointers:

- `When entering from a different room, even if going to the same floor, it still counts as going to a different dimension.`
- `When a dimension is left unvisited for one month, it automatically disappears. No record or articles remain.`

When he heard this, Allen decided to drop by before school and hopped inside to dispatch Summoner Squads. Groups of five Summons were left inside Floor 1 and Floor 2 and ordered to gather magic stones. This method was safe, inconspicuous, and was unlikely to cause anyone trouble.

The encounter rate inside a dungeon was higher than it had been in the wilderness outside Granvelle City. The squad on Floor 2 was securing around four hundred magic stones a day. Once this method was proven effective, Allen had multiple squads roaming about inside his party’s dungeon at all times.

On the No-life Gamers’ fifth time through the Rank C dungeon, they reached the sixth floor. Unlike on the previous floors, which had all had a corridor stretching out from the FOS cube room, here the group found a giant pair of double doors before them immediately upon being teleported.

“Hey, there’re some doors in the back over there,” Cecil pointed out.

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” Allen replied.

By now, the two were used to speaking casually with each other. Thanks to living together at their base, they were now much more in tune with what the other was thinking.

“Which means this is the last floor, right?”

“I think so. I mean, we *were* told that Rank C dungeons have a maximum of six floors. We can probably assume those doors open to a chamber with a boss inside.”

As the group had only just finished passing through Floor 5, it was very likely already evening outside. Although they had originally planned on returning straight after visiting this floor, since they were here already, they had decided to kill the boss first before heading back.

The heavyset doors inlaid with elaborate relief carvings promised a truly terrifying enemy beyond. When Allen touched one door, both opened automatically with an intimidating rumble. Inside was a massive, circular room roughly two hundred meters across. In the middle of the open area stood a goblin king and ten goblins lying in wait. They were surrounded by a magic circle at their feet that floated slightly above the stone-paved floor. The goblins were completely frozen, not moving even a muscle.

Are they supposed to start moving once we get within a certain distance? Allen thought before observing out loud, “I see. So the bosses of a Rank C dungeon are one Rank C monster and ten Rank D monsters.”

Everyone else nodded. As it turned out, the only Rank C monster they had encountered in this Rank C dungeon was the boss right before their eyes. Thus, in all likelihood, only the dungeon boss would be Rank B inside a Rank B dungeon.

Before the battle began, Cecil suddenly called out. “Hey, Allen?”

“Yeah?”

“I think it’s best that we know just how powerful your ability is.”

“What?”

“Can you kill these monsters with your Summons for us to see?”

Both Krena and Dogora agreed with Cecil’s request.

“Yeah! Allen’s Summons!”

“That sounds good to me. Now that you mention it, I’ve never seen his Summons fight.”

The party had been mainly relying on Cecil’s magic to kill the monsters they encountered all this time. After she had reached Lvl. 10, the cap on her skill level had been removed, and her Fire Magic skill was now Lvl. 2. Because she could earn Skill XP again, and since long-distance attacks were much more efficient than close-quarters combat, she had been tasked with doing most of the killing.

Unfortunately, Krena and Dogora were having trouble activating their skills. The way they put it was that they felt like they were getting it but it was always just barely out of reach. Consequently, they had yet to earn any Skill XP. It was proving more difficult than originally expected.

Cecil does have a point... There’s been no need for my Summons so far because this is a Rank C dungeon, but once we move on to a Rank B or Rank A one, I’m definitely gonna have to call out my Summons. Revealing them here is a good idea.

Unlike Cecil, Krena and Dogora had only seen Allen Summon little birds and mice so far. It would make things easier for them if they understood the Summons’ usefulness sooner rather than later.

Now, behold the power of my Summons after reaching Strengthening Lvl. 6!

[redacted]

Name: Allen
Age: 12
Class: Summoner
Level: 42
HP: 1,065 + 180
MP: 1,660 + 600
Attack: 584
Endurance: 584 + 180
Agility: 1,091 + 36
Intelligence: 1,670 + 636
Luck: 1,091
Skills: Summoning {5}, Creation {5}, Synthesis {5}, Strengthening {6}, Expansion {4}, Storage, Sharing, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 3,016,226/60,000,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 5
Creation: 5
Synthesis: 5
Strengthening: 6
Skill ExperienceCreation: 3,636,038/10,000,000
Synthesis: 3,635,015/10,000,000
Strengthening: 1,220/100,000,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: D, E, F, G, H
Beast: D, E, F, G, H
Bird: D, E, F, G
Grass: D, E, F
Stone: D, E
Fish: D
HolderInsect:
Beast: D x 14
Bird: G x 3, E x 3
Grass:
Stone:
Fish: D x 30

[redacted]

Last month, Allen had finally reached Strengthening Lvl. 6, which gave Summons +500 in their two relevant stats. After that, he moved on to leveling up Creation and Synthesis. He had taken thirty-five thousand Rank D magic stones—a combination of both those originally in his possession and those he obtained through the Adventurer's Guild—and converted all of them into Crops of Magic. Each one gave 1,000 MP and cost five Rank D magic stones to make. That worked out to 200 MP per magic stone. Thirty-five thousand Rank D magic stones therefore equated to seven million Skill XP.

“Gimme a sec,” Allen said before setting his grimoire flipping busily Creating, Synthesizing, and Strengthening.

“What’s going on?!” Dogora asked, taken aback.

“It looks so cool!” Krena cheered.

Allen approached the boss with Dogora and Krena close behind and Cecil at the very back. Once he crossed the fifty-meter mark, the monsters began moving.

“Teddys, kill the monsters. Brons, protect us.”

Eight Beast Ds materialized in a circle around the monsters and promptly began making short work of them using Crush. In fact, the Summons were so powerful, they managed to kill both the goblins and the goblin king with a single attack each.

Krena’s and Dogora’s eyes were bugging out as they watched the fight.

“See?! Allen is amazing, isn’t he?!” Cecil crowed, acting proud for some reason.

“So amazing! It was over in the blink of an eye!” Krena cried.

Seeing the magic stones fall to the ground, Allen nodded. “All right, all done. Wait, huh?”

The moment the floor boss died, a new magic circle appeared up ahead. Allen braced himself for another monster, but it was a treasure chest that appeared instead. *Oh right, the cube said that the rewards dropped by boss monsters are guaranteed to be safe.*

As the party leader, Allen walked forward and opened the chest. The other three crowded around to peer over his shoulders. The lid opened up to reveal a steel sword inside.

“I guess this is our reward for killing the dungeon boss,” Allen murmured. “If I remember correctly, the boss only appears once per day, right?”

“That’s what we were told,” Cecil replied.

In other words, each adventurer party could challenge the bosses of all the dungeons they had cleared once every day. In this way, the No-life Gamers completed their very first run of their very first Rank C dungeon.

Chapter 4: School Assignment and Pickup Groups

After clearing their first Rank C dungeon, the No-life Gamers returned to the Adventurer's Guild to get promoted to Rank D. Now that they could directly reach the furthest level of a dungeon, they agreed to make a daily task out of it. They could finish up the dungeon quickly enough to do it even on school days.

The boss on the deepest floor of a dungeon would respawn at the stroke of midnight. The first one they defeated dropped a steel sword that sold for two gold. With all four of the children living together, their expenses were nothing to scoff at. They were not living extravagantly, but they did eat out for all three meals—Krena in particular had a rather huge appetite—plus they had their tuition. Allen claimed all of the magic stones they picked up from the dungeons, so the boss rewards would go toward the group's livelihood. They were quite random: sometimes a weapon, armor, or even potions, but always sellable for one or two gold.

Once the party cleared their second Rank C dungeon, they would visit that one daily as well—adding it to their quota, so to say. There were three Rank C dungeons within walking distance of their house, as well as two Bs and one A, coming to a total of six.

Everyone agreed with the daily quota and money distribution, but Cecil did have one request: to hire someone to do the chores. Their house was large enough for twenty people. At the moment, the four of them were splitting the housework. However, the more dungeons they cleared and added to their daily quota, the more unsustainable this arrangement would become.

This was also something that Allen had considered. After all, a housekeeper would not cost more than three gold a month. In the end, they decided to bring it up again once they had a few more dungeons under their belts.

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It was now early May, and a new week of school was beginning. Although their seats were not assigned, the students in Allen's class had more or less settled into sitting with their clusters of friends. Allen had chosen a seat next to the window so he could look outside while converting the latest batch of ten thousand Rank D magic stones from the Guild into two thousand Crops of Magic. He was able to Create and Synthesize inside the classroom with no one being any the wiser, but turning Grass D Summons into Crops of Magic required actual soil. Therefore, he had selected a patch of dirt out of the way and, while pretending to be casually gazing outside, busied himself with raising his Skill Levels. Bird Gs then

picked up the completed Crops with their beaks and deposited them inside the grimoire's Storage.

Of course, Allen was capable of listening to the lesson at the same time.

"Good morning, Allen."

"Good morning, Rifol."

When Allen reached his seat, the student in front of him, a slender boy named Rifol, greeted him. Rifol came from the family of a count; although he himself looked slender and delicate, his father was actually a general. Allen had purposely approached him as a source of information about the battlefield; Rifol had approached Allen in turn, most likely as a way to build a rapport with Sword Lord Krena. Allen had no problem with forming relationships based on mutual self-interest.

"Have you heard the news yet, Allen?"

"What news?"

"Sword Lord Dverg is coming to teach at the Academy next month. And the Hero's coming with him."

Oh, nice! Lessons with Dverg! And the Hero's coming again, huh? It hasn't even been two months since I saw him last at the entrance exam. Does he have nothing better to do? Nah, that can't be.

Battle with the Demon Lord Army did not rage twenty-four seven, and the fortresses were not besieged at every moment of every day. Recently, perhaps thanks to the Hero's efforts, assaults on Alliance fortifications had gone down from two or three times a year to only one.

Really makes one wonder just how many monsters the Hero's killed...

That Hero and the man said to be Ratash's most powerful fighter were coming to the Academy. Thanks to the convenience of the magic ships, the Hero could now make the trip every year to give the first-year students direct instruction.

Who knows, maybe he's just doing it to drum up a reputation as someone who cares about the students. In any case, good thing I get to drop by any afternoon class I want. I'll try taking his.

As there were no classes specifically for Summoners, Allen was allowed to attend any of the practical classes. Just as he was happily mulling over the welcome news from Rifol, Carlova entered the classroom. Homeroom began as usual.

"I've got news, so listen up." With the brusqueness of a gym teacher, Carlova went through several announcements. Then he asked, "So, it's been a month since school started. Y'all gettin' along well?"

The students exchanged glances, puzzled as to where he was going with the question.

"Some of you might already know this, but over summer break, you're gonna hafta clear a dungeon."

Wait, huh?

"Any dungeon will do," Carlova continued, "but those who don't will be expelled."

One girl’s soft exclamation of “What?!” reverberated louder than expected within the stunned silence.

“Here are the conditions for the dungeon clearing. You hafta do it in groups of eight max. You can invite first-years from the other classes, but *no one* from the upper grades. And *no* hiring non-school personnel like adventurers. If you cheat, it’ll go on your adventurer record and you’ll be expelled.”

The room became abuzz with furious whispering. The calmer students had likely already heard this information ahead of time.

“Oh, and just saying, but last year about twenty students died in the dungeons for this assignment. Make sure to do your research before going.”

Cries of despair filled the classroom. Carlova did not give a single detail about how the dungeons worked or how dangerous they were. It was clear that he wanted the students to do all the work themselves, starting from forming their own parties.

I see, so that’s how it is. This is to help nobles find commoners who’d go along with them to the battlefield.

Allen had suspected this might have been the intention when he first heard Carlova forbidding the usage of titles among the students when the school year first began. After effectively getting rid of social class differences, the school was then forcing the students to cooperate on achieving a clear-cut yet challenging objective and hopefully form close bonds in the process.

Once they all learned about Demon Lord history next year, the commoners and serfs—who would not be obligated to fight against the Demon Lord Army—would find out that their comrades in arms were being sent to the battlefield where they had a high chance of dying. This was clearly the Alliance’s attempt to bolster the number of Talented individuals heading to the battlefield.

“HAAAAAAAAAHHHH!” a brawny male student shouted as he leaped to his feet, interrupting Allen’s thoughts. Everyone looked his way in surprise. “My name is Hector! I’m looking for friends to go dungeon delving with! Are there any Swordsmen, Spear Users, or Ax Users interested?! I’m only looking for seven more people!”

“Heck yeah, count me in!” one of their classmates replied.

Seeing that, another person stood up as well and began recruiting party members. Carlova watched all this with his arms crossed, showing no intention of stepping in.

They’re recruiting for pickup groups. That’s literally what this is.

The sight of some people shouting for party members and others looking to join those parties invoked a strong sense of déjà vu in Allen. He had seen this happen more times than he could count in his previous life.

Most of the games that he had played had a friends list feature, and most players often partied with those friends. Sometimes, however, a much larger group of players was needed, such as for taking on large-scale

dungeons or repeatedly killing bosses for specific items. Those times called for so-called “pickup groups”—PUGs for short—which referred to groups of players teaming up for a short period of time. Allen had no shortage of memories tirelessly typing “LFP” and “LFM”—“looking for party” and “looking for member,” respectively—in the in-game chat. And this was exactly what was taking place before him now.

Hah, what noobs! I’ll show you how a pro who’s spent two hours shouting for PUGs every day does it. Feast your eyes on this!

Allen stood up. Krena and Dogora looked his way, wondering what he was planning.

“Are you going to gather party members?” Cecil asked from her seat behind Allen’s.

“Mm-hm,” Allen nodded. “I’m gonna use this opportunity to find us a Cleric.”

If I were to do this in game chat, it’d probably be something like, “Demon Lord raid PT LF Cleric. Have Summoner, Sword Lord, Wizardess, Ax User. First-timers OK.” Though I guess that’s for the future. We’re only recruiting for a dungeon party right now.

Allen inhaled deeply, then shouted at the top of his lungs, “EVERYONE, PLEASE LISTEN UP! I’M RECRUITING MEMBERS FOR DUNGEON DELVING!” Once he saw that he had the room’s attention, he continued. “Take a look at this! This is a Rank D adventurer card. My party only has four people, but we’ve already cleared one Rank C dungeon. This here is proof!”

He took out his adventurer card from Storage and held it up. Then he passed it to a nearby student, who examined it and confirmed, “I-It’s true. It really is a Rank D adventurer card.”

Now everyone in the class was totally focused on Allen, including Carlova, who still had his arms crossed.

“My party has been going to dungeons twice a week since the start of the school year! Within the past month, we’ve finished clearing *two* Rank C dungeons!”

The class buzzed once more with surprise at Allen’s revelation.

“We are currently looking for a Cleric or someone with a healing Talent! The requirement is the ability to dedicate at least one day each week to going dungeon delving with us!”

Someone mumbled, “Are you serious? That’s once every single week, then.”

Allen honestly wanted someone who could go both days, but he was willing to let one day be the minimum. It was basic courtesy to be up-front about hard requirements.

“Although the dungeon is indeed dangerous, you can rest easy. We have a Sword Lord and a Wizardess in our party. I can’t completely guarantee your safety, but you can rest assured that you’ll be joining a really stacked party of Talents.”

Including information that would alleviate any worries of danger was also an important aspect of recruiting.

"All items and boss rewards we pick up in the dungeons will be split evenly! With only five people in the party, you'd get quite a significant share!"

Naturally, Allen also made sure to mention the benefits. No one would join a party where they stood to gain nothing. Having said his piece, Allen sat down and looked around to study his classmates' reactions. Although everyone still had their attention on him, no one raised their hand.

Well, I guess it isn't gonna be that easy.

Most children Appraised with a healing Talent were taken in by the Church. Allen remembered this happening to one serf child on the day of his own Ceremony. Given this, he had suspected that it would be difficult to find someone who fit the bill here in the Academy.

Clerics were never in want of work postgraduation; there was no end of nobles who would want to hire them. Even if one did join Allen's party now, the chances of that person being willing to stick with them to fight the Demon Lord Army were even slimmer.

Of course, Allen had a backup plan in case he could not find a healer within the student body: hiring an adventurer. If the No-life Gamers earned enough from the dungeons, they could afford to have a capable one on retainer. However, such a person would be coming from a different place than the rest of the party. Since the group was looking for someone to become an ally they could entrust their backs to, even in the face of the Demon Lord Army, another student attending the same school and sharing the same experiences as them would be much more preferable.

"That was impressive," Rifol commented from his seat in front of Allen's. He sounded surprised.

"Thank you," Allen replied. "Although we're not recruiting a Swordsman at the moment, if you ever need help with the dungeons, feel free to ask me. I'll see what I can do."

We can dispatch our Sword Lord. Our Ax User would even come along as a set.

Rifol's eyes lit up with delight. "Really? I just might take you up on your offer!" He probably had yet to figure out how he would go about clearing this assignment. Coming from a noble family, he absolutely had to graduate. He was surely feeling the pressure of living up to being the son of a general.

That afternoon, just as Allen's group was about to head to the cafeteria, they were approached by a slender student slightly taller than Allen. He had spiky blond hair that, paired with his menacing eyes, gave him the impression of a delinquent.

"Are you Allen?"

"Yes, that's me. Were you looking to join our party?"

"My name's Keel. You still looking for a healer?"

Ohhhhh! A healer's come!

“Yes, we are. No one else has approached us yet, so the spot’s still free. Are you a healer?”

“I am. Can I hear more about your offer?”

“Of course. Come join us for lunch.”

The cafeteria at the Academy was buffet-style, with admission price being a steal at two coppers. It was now customary for Krena and Dogora to eat a mountain of food every day. This day, too, Krena grabbed a plate and immediately headed toward the food without sparing a single glance for anything else. Allen followed suit before eventually coming back to their table, his own plate of food in hand. There, he found Keel waiting for them, nursing a single cup of water. A short while later, Krena and Dogora showed up with their loaded plates.

Seeing how Keel was staring at all their food, Allen said, “Sorry for making you wait. Feel free to go get your own lunch now. We’ll keep your seat.”

Keel started. “Huh? Oh, uh, I’m good, thanks. I don’t eat lunch.”

Does he have a small appetite? He looks hungry, though, Allen thought before insisting, “With this being our first meeting and all, please, let me treat you.”

“Huh? Nah, I can’t—”

“There’s no need to be reserved. I said we’ll talk over lunch, right?”

When Allen pressed two coppers into Keel’s hand, the other boy mumbled, “Sorry. And thanks,” before heading to the buffet.

Although he seemed somewhat hesitant about eating on the coin of someone he’d just met, when he got back, his hands held plates loaded with just as much food as Krena’s and Dogora’s, indicating that he must have been ravenous.

Allen nodded with satisfaction before starting off the talk. “Once again, I’m Allen. These are my friends: Cecil, Krena, and Dogora.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Cecil said courteously, while Krena cheerfully went, “Hi!” and Dogora nodded with a “How you doing?”

Keel lowered his head and said to the group, “Thanks for sparing your time. I’m Keel.”

“So,” Allen said, “you’re interested in joining our party?”

“Yep. My Talent’s Cleric. Can you tell me more specifically what this party is doing?”

Heck, yeah! A Cleric! Though he doesn’t look like one at all.

After the tongue-in-cheek mental comment, Allen proceeded to explain how the No-life Gamers were a party of four who had come from the same fiefdom and were focusing on clearing dungeons together. He once again went over how they had been heading to the dungeons twice a week and that he expected the new member to also accompany them on at least one of those days. Trying to not scare Keel away, he refrained from mentioning living together in the house or the daily dungeon boss fights.

“I see.” Keel nodded thoughtfully. “How about the money? Do you earn a lot?”

Oh? Is it the money that he cares about?

Allen changed the topic to accommodate Keel’s question. “We earn a reasonable amount. When you kill monsters, they drop magic stones. And when you kill the boss at the lowest level of a dungeon, it is guaranteed to drop a treasure chest. The items from a Rank C dungeon boss’s chest usually go for one or two gold.”

“W-Wow, that’s twenty to forty silver each among five people. Can I join you guys once as a trial?”

“Of course! We’d be glad to have you.”

In this way, Keel, the boy with the Cleric Talent, decided to join Allen’s group for dungeon delving.

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Although it was as yet a trial period, the healer that Allen had been awaiting all this time had finally joined his group. As it turned out, not only did Keel have no experience entering a dungeon, he had never even fought a monster before. The reason he had approached Allen was, in all likelihood, money.

Unfortunately, one could not teleport to a floor they had not visited before. Unlike the No-life Gamers, Keel would have to start from the very first floor. The three Rank C dungeons closest to the base had four, five, and six floors. The third one that Allen’s group was just about to begin challenging was the one with four floors, so they expected to finish it within the next two weeks.

Allen told Keel that they would not be able to get much of an income until they cleared the dungeon and asked him if that was all right with him; the boy confirmed it was fine if it was only for two weeks. Furthermore, he said that he wished to accompany the party when they visited the dungeons each week on both days.

With the discussion finalized, the weekend soon rolled around. Allen led his group—now a total of five—to the building housing a dungeon entrance. He made sure to double- and triple-check that Keel, despite not being officially part of the No-life Gamers, could still enter the same dungeon instance as them. The General Dungeon Operating System confirmed that those entering the dungeon at the same time from the same room would end up in the same instance even if they were not partied together.

“And there you have it, Keel,” Allen said. “It looks like you will be able to join us just fine.”

“Do we enter from here?” Keel asked, somewhat bewildered.

Allen nodded. “We do.” At the moment, Allen was still speaking courteously and formally with Keel. He believed that it was only common courtesy to treat pickup party members with respect, so he was prioritizing his own values over the school rules.

The five of them then teleported into the dungeon. After a whole month of dungeon delving, everyone in the No-life Gamers had leveled up quite significantly. The Rank E monsters that appeared in their way no longer posed a threat. In order to protect Keel, Krena and Dogora stood in front, Cecil stood beside him in the middle, and Allen brought up the rear.

"Keel, I'm now going to bring out the 'large allies' that I told you about before," Allen warned.

"Large al— WHAT THE?!"

Even though he had been briefed beforehand, Keel inadvertently yelped in surprise. Allen had Summoned two Brons and made them walk on either side of Cecil and Keel for protection's sake. What surprised Keel the most, though, was how no one else seemed shocked.

"This is my Talent," Allen said.

"I...I see. This...really is incredible."

Although Allen had no intention of showing Keel the full extent of his powers just yet, he could not have the boy believe him a powerless member only there to boss everyone around. Furthermore, he had hoped that this display of power would reassure Keel and convince him to join the No-life Gamers.

"Speaking of powers, do you already know how to use yours, Keel?" Allen took the opportunity to inquire about Keel's abilities after having revealed his own. Since enrolling in the Academy, Allen had learned that just because someone possessed a Talent, it did not necessarily mean they knew how to use their skills.

"Huh? Oh, yes, I do."

So he can. I was willing to accept him even if he couldn't, so this is a nice surprise.

Both Krena and Dogora were still unable to use their skills. The most important thing in using skills was creating the mental image; not being able to visualize the skill meant not being able to use it.

In this regard, Cecil had taken lessons from a tutor at the Granvelle mansion who had also shown her how he cast magic. There could not have been a better environment to learn how to use magic skills.

Meanwhile, Allen had been able to use Summoning ever since he turned one year old. In all likelihood, the deities had probably drawn the images of mice, bears, and birds from his own memory to make it easier for him to conjure them up in his mind. Cards floating in midair were also a common motif in games he had played before.

"Where did you learn how to use your magic?" Allen asked, continuing the conversation.

"From the Church. They said they'd pay me if I learned it."

Keel went on to explain that he was told he would be given a daily stipend of ten silver if he would expend all his MP each day healing patients. He would also be fed during the learning period. He signed up and spent two months mastering the ability.

Two months is pretty fast. Maybe seeing other clergy using the skill in person made it easier for him to grasp how to do it.

If Keel could earn ten silver on each of the two days he had off every week, over five weeks that came to a monthly salary of one gold. Someone who could earn twelve gold a year was generally considered well-off.

During his four years as a manservant, Allen had learned that jobs paying a monthly salary of one gold or higher were actually hard to come by. The average apprentice at a merchant’s store only earned around half that amount.

It cost one gold to enroll at the Academy, plus a yearly tuition of ten gold. This cost covered things such as the uniform, learning materials, and equipment for practicals.

If I remember correctly, students are exempt from the head tax while enrolled.

In many fiefdoms, students would receive financial aid based on their entrance exam grade: a half scholarship for B and a full scholarship for A or S. Any more financial support was forbidden by the Five Continent Alliance, as their policy was for students to earn their living costs by frequenting the dungeons.

If he’s this poor, then he’s probably not a noble.

The ideal party member would be another noble who would have to go to the battlefield either way because of their duty. However, Allen was perfectly accepting of both commoners and serfs as well.

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Two weeks later, on the third day that Keel was accompanying the No-life Gamers, the group finally found themselves on the deepest floor of the dungeon they were exploring.

“So, that’s the boss?” Keel asked.

Allen nodded. “That’s right.”

Ten goblins surrounded one orc, all standing stock-still inside a magic circle.

“Okay. Everyone, ready?”

It was up to Krena, Cecil, and Dogora to defeat this boss. After all, this was an opportunity for them to get some practice fighting as a team; having Allen take care of everything by himself would be a waste. These monsters made for good targets against which Krena and Dogora could attempt to use their skills, and Cecil could always do with earning more Skill XP. To sum it up, there was a lot more to gain having these three do the fighting.

Krena and Dogora charged toward the monsters together as Cecil blasted off spells from a distance. The orc and goblins finally started moving, triggered by the incoming projectiles. Allen Summoned some Brons to protect Cecil and Keel.

The orc thrust its spear with all its strength, but Dogora blocked it with his ax. Krena took advantage of the opening to close in with her greatsword.

Looks like they can handle a lone Rank C monster without issue. Yep, it really is time to get to a Rank B dungeon. We're too overleveled for Rank C dungeons now.

Thanks to the past one and a half months of dungeon delving, a Rank C monster no longer posed a challenge for Krena, Dogora, and Cecil. Once all the enemies were cleared away, Allen, Keel, and Cecil hurried forward to regroup with the vanguard.

Spotting a wound Dogora had received from the orc, Keel asked, "Are you okay?" and held out his hands. "Heal."

So, that's how Healing Magic looks in action.

This was Allen's first time seeing Keel use his Talent. After all, no one in the party had gotten hurt over the past two weeks.

When Keel was finished, the group turned their attention to the treasure chest that had appeared when the boss fell. This time, the box appeared to be made of silver, not wood.

"Looks like we're in luck today," Allen commented.

"WHOAAAA! IT'S TREASURE!" Keel, who over the past two weeks had mainly just followed the group without speaking much, could not help but whoop out loud. "Wait, we're in luck?"

The dungeon sure plays up the "Hey, this is a rare drop!" feel.

According to the GDOS, dungeon bosses could drop three kinds of treasure chests: wooden, silver, and gold. It could not divulge the exact drop rates of each, but because the party was getting around one silver chest for every nine wooden ones—they had yet to see a gold chest—Allen estimated the probability of each to be ninety percent for wooden, over nine percent for silver, and under one percent for gold.

Allen opened the chest, revealing a piece of mithril equipment inside. "I guess you'd call this a buckler, right? At this size, and with it being mithril, it'd probably go for over ten gold."

"*TEN GOLD*?! WHOAAAAA!" Keel cheered again. He then suddenly looked anxious. "Uh, we're splitting that evenly, right?"

"Of course." Allen nodded emphatically.

The group headed back out, enveloped in a cheery air of success. The armor store was still open, so they brought the buckler in to sell. The merchant gave them fifteen gold for it, working out to three gold for each of them. Because Allen had not mentioned keeping all the magic stones himself, he also handed Keel a fifth of what they had picked up that day.

With a simple "Th-Thank you!" Keel dashed off into the night, headed for the magic train station.

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The next day, Keel said he wanted to formally join the No-life Gamers. The three gold had been the clincher. Allen immediately brought him to the Adventurer's Guild to have him registered.

`<Keel has joined your party.>`

Now Allen could also see Keel's Status in his grimoire. According to this, Keel did not have a family name, confirming that he was not a noble after all. This meant he would not be conscripted to the battlefield. There was no telling whether he would be interested in coming with the group in three years, but being able to recruit a Cleric a little over a month into the school year was a huge deal. Allen intended to slowly introduce him to everything that made the No-life Gamers a great party.

It was honestly quite convenient that Keel's motivator was money. If he had only been looking to clear the summer break assignment, he might not have had a reason to stay with the group past his first dungeon clear.

Since he was now part of the party, Allen asked Keel two things: whether he wanted to live in the base with the rest of them, and if he was interested in joining the party to revisit previously cleared dungeons every morning to kill the bosses again. The former, Keel turned down, only saying that he was unable to accept; the latter, he was more than happy to say yes to.

When Allen checked with the Guild, he learned that in order to enter a Rank B dungeon, *everyone* in the group had to be a Rank C adventurer. The party leader alone being Rank C was not enough. Keel was the only member who did not have enough Rank C dungeons under his belt. The group agreed to bring him through the dungeons they had already cleared to help him rank up as well.

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It was now late one early June night, right before the start of a new school week. They were more than two months into the school year, and something Allen had been waiting a long time for had finally come true. He was alone in his room—he and Dogora were on the second floor while the girls were on the third—and grinning at his grimoire all by himself.

`<The Skill XP of Synthesis has reached 10,000,000/10,000,000. Synthesis has reached Lvl. 6. Summoning has reached Lvl. 6. Expansion has reached Lvl. 5. You have obtained Awakening.>`

Two years and eleven months later, Summoning's finally leveled up again!

Allen updated his progress record based on the golden lines in the log on the cover. Of the many goals he had for his three years at the Academy, one was to reach Summoning Lvl. 7 and gain access to Rank B Summons. According to the magic tutor, many of the monsters under the Demon Lord Army's control were Rank A. From his own experience, Allen knew that his Summons could handily defeat monsters one rank higher than themselves. They could also manage to take down monsters two ranks higher, but only with substantial casualties, incurring a significant cost in magic stones.

I've spent pretty much all my money and Rank C magic stones just for the sake of this level up. I hope I can register another request with the Guild next month.

At the moment, Allen only had a few dozen gold and a thousand Rank C magic stones left. This was the cushion he was keeping for emergencies, meaning he had pretty much emptied out his coffers.

He studied the page in his grimoire that detailed his skills and Summons.

[redacted]

Skill LevelsSummoning: 6
Creation: 6
Synthesis: 6
Strengthening: 6
Awakening: 1
Skill ExperienceCreation: 1,004/100,000,000
Synthesis: 0/100,000,000
Strengthening: 3,180/100,000,000
Awakening: 0/1,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: C, D, E, F, G, H
Beast: C, D, E, F, G, H
Bird: C, D, E, F, G
Grass: C, D, E, F
Stone: C, D, E
Fish: C, D
???: C
HolderInsect:
Beast: D x 9
Bird: G x 3, E x 3
Grass:
Stone:
Fish: D x 30
???:

[redacted]

Looks like Summoning Lvl. 6 has given me a new type of card, another level in Expansion, and a new skill.

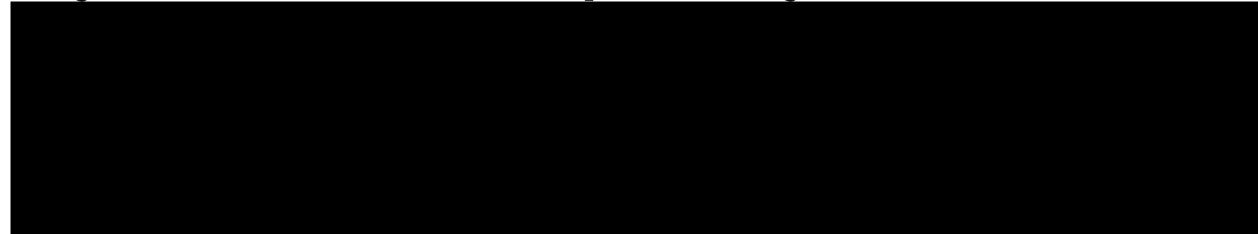
Allen checked over each new update one by one. He started by turning to the card holder pages. Sure enough, there were now sixty slots, meaning he could now store sixty cards at any given time. This number always went up by ten each time Summoning leveled up, so there was no surprise there.

That leaves the Rank C Summons and the new Awakening skill. Finally, another skill that can be developed!

None of the skills that Allen had obtained after Strengthening could be leveled up. Although Storage and Sharing were both extremely useful, these skills only offered one benefit each that could not be further expanded upon. This time, however, the new skill had its own Skill XP counter.

Allen decided to check out his new Summons first. He still had a stock of a thousand Rank C magic stones, which would be more than enough to

create one copy of everything. So he did just that, repeatedly using Creation and Synthesis as necessary. When each new Summon was done, he assigned it a name based on the impression he got from the card.



Status of Insect C (Scorpion) Type: Insect
Rank: C
Name: Pion
HP: 320
MP: 0
Attack: 214
Endurance: 500
Agility: 500
Intelligence: 310
Luck: 120
Buffs: Endurance 50, Agility 50
Ability: Paralyze Needle**Status of Beast C (Boar)**Type: Beast
Rank: C
Name: Bacon
HP: 500
MP: 0
Attack: 500
Endurance: 360
Agility: 220
Intelligence: 320
Luck: 200
Buffs: HP 50, Attack 50
Ability: Charge**Status of Bird C (Cassowary)**Type: Bird
Rank: C
Name: Fran
HP: 76
MP: 0
Attack: 125
Endurance: 240
Agility: 500
Intelligence: 500
Luck: 340
Buffs: Agility 50, Intelligence 50
Ability: Breakthrough**Status of Grass C (Eggplant)**Type: Grass
Rank: C

Name: Mapo
HP: 78
MP: 500
Attack: 42
Endurance: 45
Agility: 67
Intelligence: 82
Luck: 500
Buffs: MP 50, Luck 50
Ability: Garnish**Status of Stone C (Suit of Steel Armor)**Type: Stone
Rank: C
Name: Steely
HP: 500
MP: 0
Attack: 455
Endurance: 500
Agility: 280
Intelligence: 390
Luck: 123
Buffs: HP 50, Endurance 50
Ability: Substitute**Status of Fish C (Shark)**Type: Fish
Rank: C
Name: Finny
HP: 200
MP: 500
Attack: 420
Endurance: 127
Agility: 160
Intelligence: 500
Luck: 360
Buffs: MP 50, Intelligence 50
Ability: Shark Oil
[redacted]

This should do it for their names, right? But wow, the stats sure have gotten high.

The highest stat went all the way up to 500, which would become 1,000 when Strengthened. And Allen could now theoretically call out sixty such Summons at once. Furthermore, the cards could now theoretically buff him by 3,000 max in two stats at the same time.

Now I just have to figure out what this new "???" type is.

Without further ado, Allen proceeded to go through every possible combination of the existent card types. When he Synthesized Bird C and

Fish C, the grimoire lit up with a dazzling glow, signifying that the process had succeeded.

“OHHHH! It’s a Spirit type!”

The Spirit C card bore an illustration of what looked like a porcelain doll in an elaborate dress with plenty of frills and lace.

Hold on, this card gives me three buffs. And this Summon has MP of its own.

At the bottom right corner of the card were the words, “Endurance +50,” “Intelligence +50,” and “Physical Damage Resistance.” In other words, it was not simply providing Allen with stat buffs. He took a closer look at his grimoire to study the Status of this new Summon.

Status of Spirit C (Porcelain Doll) Type: Spirit
Rank: C
Name: Maria
HP: 200
MP: 300
Attack: 290
Endurance: 500
Agility: 350
Intelligence: 500
Luck: 210
Buffs: Endurance 50, Intelligence 50, Physical Damage Resistance
Ability: Psychokinesis

Yep, this is a porcelain doll no matter which way I look at it. She looks like she’s around five, I’d say? Her face is cute, not scary. Judging by the description, she’s probably not all that large, so let’s try Summoning her. Maria, come out.

All of a sudden, a little girl around thirty centimeters tall wearing a poofy, old-fashioned dress appeared.

“It is my pleasure to meet you, Master. I’m *deathly* grateful to you for Summoning me.” The girl lowered her head in greeting while floating in midair. Due to being a spirit, she was semitranslucent.

“*OHHHH!* You spoke!”

This was Allen’s first Summon that could talk. He wondered if this was due to its Intelligence stat; he could not wait to check out the other Rank C Summons as well.

“Hee hee, I did *indead*.” Maria placed her hands on her hips and thrust out her chest proudly. She was basking in the sense of achievement of having taken Allen by surprise.

“Your name is Maria going forward. Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you for my name and for the warm welcome, Master.”

Hmm, her stats are high across the board, plus she's intelligent, she can communicate, and she's small enough to keep out of the way. Seems like she'd be helpful in protecting the home base. Now that I have sixty card slots, I can afford to keep two or three copies of her here permanently. Also…is it because she's a spirit that she keeps adding death-related puns to whatever she says?

Seeing Allen fall deep into thought as he stared at her, Maria floated up close to peer into his face. "What is the matter, Master?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing. Maria, are you able to pass through walls and doors?"

"*Passing on* through the walls, was it?"

The Spirit C immediately flew straight toward the door and disappeared into it. Clearly, she could indeed phase through matter.

"Awesome, thanks." Seems like she'll come in handy in the dungeons too.

In addition to fish that could swim through the ground, Allen now had access to spirits that could fly through walls. Sharing with Belly was not especially helpful, as his field of vision would be all dark when it was underground. With Maria, however, he would be able to see through barriers, which ought to prove helpful when dungeon delving.

Since she's self-aware, I should take the time to communicate with her properly and get to know her personality.

The next thing for Allen to do was to examine the Awakening skill. He Created one Insect H—this card was fast becoming his go-to when experimenting with skills. During this time, Maria continued floating about the room, watching what he was doing.

Okay, Awaken!

The edges of the card abruptly turned into rainbow-colored foil.

"WHOOAAA! That looks awakened all right. All right, come on out, Denka!"

The card disappeared and was replaced by a faintly glowing Insect H. Allen looked at his grimoire to confirm exactly what Awakening had done.

[redacted]

Status of Insect H (Grasshopper) Type: Insect
Rank: H
Name: Denka
HP: 3
MP: 0
Attack: 2
Endurance: 5
Agility: 5
Intelligence: 1
Luck: 2
Buffs: Endurance 1, Agility 1

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Ability: Hop
Awakened Ability: Swarm
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Oh? There's a new field. So Denka gets a second Ability? Does the same happen for all the other cards?

Allen double-checked the Statuses of the other cards, but they did not have this extra field, indicating that it had indeed been added due to the Awakening skill.

"Swarm" sounds kind of interesting. Let's try it out. Denka, use Swarm.

The Insect H looked at Allen, then glowed.

"HOLD ON, *WHAT*?!"

In the blink of an eye, Allen's room was filled with what looked like a hundred large grasshoppers. It was a living nightmare.

"Hold on, no, time out! Revert! Go back!"

In response to his command, all but one of the Insect Hs disappeared.

"Phew, that was... That was something all right. Wait, I still need to confirm how long it can last." Allen inhaled and exhaled a few times to calm back down, then used Awakening once more. However, nothing happened. *Uh oh, I can only use the skill once on each card?*

He tried Summoning and Unsummoning Denka a few times, but the Awakened Ability just would not activate.

Before confirming the duration, looks like I need to first figure out why the skill isn't working again. Let's try Creating a new Insect H card.

Allen cast Awakening on the newly Created card. It worked just fine. After steeling his heart, he called out the Awakened Insect H card and ordered it to use its new Ability. Once again, his room was covered with grasshoppers. He promptly deactivated the skill and reverted Denka to its card.

This confirms that each card can only be Awakened once. Okay, let's sum up what I learned.

- Using the Awakening skill costs 100 MP
- (Seems like) each card can only use its Awakened Ability once
- To be confirmed: Can the Awakened Ability be used again after some time?

If each card could only use its Awakened Ability once, that meant he would have to expend magic stones every single time he ordered one to do so. This would eat up to a lot of magic stones very quickly and would become quite taxing, especially once he obtained higher-ranked Summons. However, he recalled how some games he had played in his previous life had a "cooldown" feature—after using certain skills, he had to wait a set period of time before being able to use those skills again. The general rule

was, the more powerful the spell, the longer the cooldown. For now, Allen decided to put his faith in the cooldown theory and left both Denkas alone.

Lastly, I gotta see what the Awakened Abilities are for all the cards.

Based on the name alone, it seemed highly likely that Awakened Abilities were more potent and powerful than normal Abilities. This time, Allen Created a Beast H—the mouse Summon—and Awakened it.

Status of Beast H (Mouse) Type: Beast
Rank: H
Name: Mousey
HP: 5
MP: 0
Attack: 5
Endurance: 2
Agility: 3
Intelligence: 1
Luck: 2
Buffs: HP 1, Attack 1
Ability: Scurry
Awakened Ability: Proliferate

Okay, that name doesn't bode well if we're talking about mice here.

Allen Summoned the Beast H and had it use its Awakened Skill. The next moment, there were two Beast Hs, then four, then eight, then sixteen.

"This is the same effect as Denka's! How is—"

"Do you know what *time* it is?!" Cecil roared as she burst into Allen's room in her nightgown.

Hold on, you can't just barge into a teenage boy's room without permission!

With the door wide open, Cecil's gaze fell upon the growing horde of mice. The blood quickly drained from her face.

"Ah, I'm sorry for being so noisy," Allen apologized while deactivating Mousey's Awakened Skill and Unsummoning it.

"What's wrong, Allen?" Krena mumbled groggily, stumbling into the room wearing her pajamas.

Thumps sounded from down the hallway before Dogora also came in. All the commotion had apparently woken him up, despite the fact that he was normally a heavy sleeper.

"Wh-Wha's goin' o— *Bffft*!" The moment Dogora showed up, Cecil's fist slammed into his face.

"HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU TO PUT ON SOME BLOODY CLOTHES?!" she screamed, her face scarlet.

Allen stared at the ruckus, recalling with nostalgia how Dogora had often gone around in the same scant getup during the summers back in Krena Village.

"*Death* these be your acquaintances, Master?"

"These are my friends and companions. Get along with them, okay, Maria?"

"Your will is my command."

The Spirit C smiled as she joined Allen in watching the lively commotion.

Chapter 5: Sword Lord Dverg’s Arrival

A crowd had formed in a corner of Allen’s classroom.

“We’re thinking of giving the next floor a try sometime soon with our current party.”

“Uster, I think you’re pushing a bit too fast—the next floor might be tough for those in your party who haven’t overcome as many Trials yet. If I were you, I’d put off the new floor until next month. As for your formation...”

It was early in the morning before homeroom, two days after Allen obtained Summoning Lvl. 6. Uster, one of Allen’s classmates, had approached him and asked for advice on his own party’s progress through their dungeon, laying out a sheet of parchment on Allen’s desk. Allen replied as best he could in light of the strengths and weaknesses of the group. Many other students formed a circle around the two to listen in.

Ever since the announcement in early May about the summer break assignment, many students had come to consult Allen. After all, he was the leader of the only party who already had a dungeon clear under its belt. Allen had patiently dealt with all of them in turn, considering the composition and the levels of the members of each group.

Keel was not present within the crowd. Rather, he was sitting all by himself a slight distance away. Despite having received his share of the rewards from the dungeons over the past twenty days, Keel’s lunches—or the lack thereof—had remained the same.

He skipped lunch again. I really ought to have a proper talk with him soon.

As Allen was thinking about Keel, Carlova walked in.

“Go on, get to your seats. Let’s get started with announcements.”

The crowd surrounding Allen scattered, and the sound of chair legs against the floor rang out for a short while.

“As I said last week, Sword Lord Dverg is in town to give y’all lessons. He’ll be teachin’ ya this afternoon. Don’t you dare make trouble for him.”

Carlova went on to explain that Dverg had arrived in Academy City last week and that he was accompanied by not only the Hero Helmios but also another Sword Lord from Giamut. Allen wondered if the battlefield would be fine with so many key assets away, but then figured they would not have come if their absence was so crucial.

On a whim, Allen looked over at Krena, a Sword Lord herself, and almost did a spit take. *I know that face! She’s plotting something!*

Krena was staring at their homeroom teacher, her eyes sparkling with motivation. That sparkle gave Allen a strong sense of foreboding.

Morning classes came to an end, and Allen allowed his classmates to herd him toward the cafeteria. Because he would head to the dungeons immediately after school every day, the only times his classmates were able

to pick his brain about their own dungeon-delving efforts were before homeroom and during lunch. Everyone was understandably desperate, and Allen was willing to be of service. The truth was that he wanted to check up on Keel but decided to put it off until the weekend.

After lunch came their lesson with Sword Lord Dverg. There were three thousand first-year students here at the Academy. In order to get to them all, Dverg was teaching several classes at once each time. The students were free to opt in or out, but even so, that still meant quite a lot of participants for each lesson. Today's was to be held in the training hall, which was specifically for sparring and practice matches. Allen stood with the throng of students, together with Krena, Cecil, and Dogora. Keel was nowhere to be seen. Before long, a group of three adults arrived surrounded by the homeroom teachers of the classes present.

Oh! That's gotta be Dverg. This is my first time seeing him. Next to him is the self-proclaimed Hero and a pretty lady.

Allen stared at the white-haired man wearing an eyepatch who bore countless scars on his face. The first time Allen had heard this man's name was when he underwent his Appraisal Ceremony at five. The fact that his name was known even in such a remote frontier village spoke volumes about his fame in Ratash.

It was said that Sword Lord Dverg was born as a serf and was now over seventy years old. A few other Sword Lords had been born in Ratash after Dverg, but he was the only one still alive. This was a man who had dedicated every part of his life to the fight. He spent most of the year rushing from battlefield to battlefield, with these lessons at the Academy being one of the very few reasons for him to return to Ratash.

One of the teachers proceeded to go on at length about just how incredible Dverg was for the sake of the students who were not familiar enough with the stories of his feats. Because he had to gloss over details that touched on Demon Lord history, the teacher's account ended up being rather abstract.

Eventually, the teacher moved on to introducing the Hero. Most of the students had believed that the Hero was a fictional being who only appeared within the stories they heard as children. More than a few murmured, "So, the Hero really *does* exist..." Helmios himself was all smiles as always, even going so far as to do a little wave to everyone who reacted with a doubtful "Is he really the Hero?"

According to Carlova's earlier explanation during homeroom, the lesson was to be split into three main parts. The teacher-in-charge would first lecture on the three guest instructors' feats, followed by a question-and-answer session. Then the students would do practice swings and receive pointers. The first part ended up lasting around thirty minutes. Then the floor opened up for student questions.

"Anyone have questions for Lord Helmios, Lord Dverg, or Lady Sylvia?"

"Yes! Pick me, please! I have a question for Lord Dverg!"

Allen’s head whipped around at hearing the familiar voice. The speaker was Krena, of course. The sight of the pink-haired girl boldly raising her hand high from within the crowd of students, who all cowed in the presence of the Hero and Sword Lords, prompted Dverg to raise an eyebrow.

Carlova looked over. “Ah, Krena. You have a question for Lord Dverg?”

“Krena?” Dverg repeated her name.

“She is the Sword Lord who enrolled this year, sir,” Carlova replied respectfully before turning back. “So, Krena, what is your question?”

“Thank you, sir! Sir, how can I use my skill?” Krena asked with an innocent smile.

“What?!” Carlova exclaimed.

As murmurs of “What’s a skill?” spread among the students, Dogora sighed.

“She’s gone and done it...”

Ever since they began visiting the dungeons back in April, Krena and Dogora had been puzzling over how to activate their skills. When Allen visited the classes teaching how to use the sword, the spear, the ax, and other weapons, he found all of them focused on practice swings and strength training. None of them had yet to mention skills.

“K-Krena! I told you that we aren’t teaching skills until next year!” Carlova roared with a red face.

Krena, you’ve already gone and asked our homeroom teacher?

Since she had not gotten a helpful answer from Carlova, Krena had clearly decided to ask Dverg directly. The Sword Lord returned her straightforward gaze with his single eye.

“Your name is Krena, correct? Krena, why do you want to know about skills?”

“Yes, sir! Because Allen has a big dream! And I wanna help him achieve it!”

“Allen? Who’s that?”

Helmios cut in, pointing at Allen. “He’s the black-haired boy that I told you about before.”

After looking at Allen for a brief moment, Dverg returned his gaze to Krena. “Helmios and Sylvia, I’ll be handling this girl named Krena. I’m leaving the rest to you.”

“Sure, sure,” the Hero replied, waving his hands dismissively.

“Krena, if you wish to learn how to use your skill, come with me.”

So he is going to teach Krena. Hey, he’s actually a pretty nice guy.

“Yes, sir!” With an innocent grin, Krena got up from the crowd and headed to the side of the venue that Dverg was gesturing toward. He handed her a practice sword with blunted edges as he lifted his own weapon in readiness.

“Attack me.”

“Huh?”

“Use your skill and cut me down.”

“Yes, sir!”

Contrary to Allen’s expectations, Dverg had chosen to help Krena grasp her skill through actual practice rather than verbal instruction.

Just how much can Krena with her current stats do against a Sword Lord who’s spent the past forty years on the battlefield? This might give me a good idea of just how powerful Krena can get.

Understanding that this was a valuable opportunity, Allen first checked Krena’s Status in his grimoire.

[redacted]

Name: Krena
Age: 12
Class: Sword Lord
Level: 30
HP: 1,240
MP: 474
Attack: 1,240
Endurance: 872
Agility: 838
Intelligence: 494
Luck: 595
Skills: Sword Lord {1}, Slash {1}, Sword Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Limit Break
XP: 14,570/30,000
Skill LevelsSword Lord: 1
Slash: 1
Skill ExperienceSlash: 0/10

[redacted]

After the two months of dungeon delving, Krena’s Attack stat had reached four figures. The party prioritized reaching the end of the dungeon, so they kept engaging with monsters to a minimum. Krena reaching Lvl. 30 was largely thanks to their daily rounds of dungeon boss battles.

Upon reaching her starting position, Krena abruptly charged toward Dverg, closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye. She brought her sword down from above using every last ounce of strength she had. However, Dverg blocked the attack with ease as if brushing off a fly. This sent Krena hurtling.

“What’s wrong? Go on, use your skill. We’ll do this until you finally get the hang of it.”

Uh, he hasn’t explained how to use her skill at all. Is this really the right way?

Once the question and answer session ended, the students scattered throughout the spacious training hall to practice. Allen had planned on joining them to get pointers from Sword Lord Sylvia, but decided to watch

Krena instead. Cecil joined him. Dogora went a ways off to learn how to better wield his ax.

Two hours passed.

"What's wrong? You're just doing the same thing again and again. You won't be able to use your skill that way!" Dverg barked provocatively.

"Y-Yes, sir!" Krena replied, desperately scrambling to her feet once more.

Another two hours passed, with Dverg continuing to send Krena flying without ever giving a single word of advice.

"We can quit if you're tired. You can dedicate the year to slowly learning how to use your skill instead."

"N-No, I can keep going!"

So, normally people take a whole year to learn. Considering this is on the curriculum for next year, that means it'd be two years before everyone else can use their skills.

"Cecil."

"Yes, Allen?"

"Have your magic classes already started teaching how to use your skills?"

"Of course. Many of the others are starting to get the hang of it."

Keel also said he learned how to use Healing Magic in a couple of months. I guess that's how long it takes on average to learn magic skills. I mean, they can't do anything without their skills, after all. In contrast, weapon wielders all have skills they can use, but it takes around a whole year to master them. Seems to me like there's some balancing going on here. Hard to tell if this is based on Intelligence or class.

Two more hours went by. The training hall was now illuminated by magic tools. Helmios and Sylvia had already finished their lesson and had joined Carlova and Allen's group watching the ongoing exchange between Dverg and Krena. Allen had already dispatched a Bird G to inform Keel, who did not participate in this class, that they would not be going to the dungeon today.

"What's wrong? The sun's already set. Come at me seriously!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Dverg still looked just as fresh as at the start of the day, but Krena was exhausted to the point of growing faint. Once more, Krena was sent flying; Allen had lost count of the number of times. She struggled to get up as her legs gave out on her again and again.

"Is that all that your friend's dream means to you?!" Dverg shouted at her.

"NO!"

"Look at yourself! You can't even get up anymore! And what have you achieved? Nothing!"

"*NO!* Allen's always worked hard! I've gotta work hard too!" Krena was finally standing, her hair and outfit an absolute mess.

“Then come! Show me your resolve with your sword!”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Krena plodded forward one step at a time.

“Come! Think only of activating your skill. Slash me with everything you have!”

Krena was so out of it she could no longer even reply. She wobbled toward Dverg slowly and, still hanging her head, lifted her sword up high.

Fwoosh!

Krena’s sword fell much faster than it ever had inside the dungeons, cutting clean through the sword Dverg lifted in defense. It finally stopped at Dverg’s skin, but the shock of the impact traveled through his body and gouged the ground at his feet.

“Well done. That is your skill. Don’t forget the sensation.”

The girl collapsed, mumbling, “I-I did it...”

“Krena? Krena!” Allen rushed to her side, Cecil and Dogora right behind him. He held her in his arms only to find her fast asleep, an expression of relief on her face.

Helmios, who had been waiting all this time, walked over. “C’mon, Dverg, why didn’t you just teach her how to use her skill? It would’ve been so much faster.”

“Helmios, don’t expect everyone to be as skillful at picking things up as you are. The way I saw it, this girl isn’t someone who understands things with her head. That said, even I’m surprised she figured it out in a day. That’s quite fast.”

Just as Dverg was looking down at the girl in Allen’s arms thoughtfully, the teacher who had lectured at the start of the lesson cried out to him, rushed over and started fussing over the shoulder where Krena’s sword had landed.

“Oh, you’re hurt?” Helmios waved a hand over the gash. “Heal.”

“It’s been a while since I was last cut by a human,” Dverg murmured. “To think that the newest Sword Lord has already grown this far...”

“No way she can cut you with her Status— Wait, huh?!” Helmios shouted in surprise as his eyes glowed, indicating that he was currently Appraising Krena.

“What happened?” Dverg asked.

“This girl’s Status is ridi— Wait, huh? Uh...what? I must have imagined it. Sorry.”

“If you say so.”

What was that about Krena’s Status? Allen checked the corresponding page in his grimoire. Hmm, her HP is back to full, but her MP’s been depleted by two. And...nice! She’s earned Skill XP!

[redacted]

Skill LevelsSword Lord: 1
Slash: 1

Skill ExperienceSlash: 2/10

[redacted]

Krena had earned Skill XP for the first time. Exhilarated, Allen turned to Dverg and thanked him on her behalf. At her feet rolled the practice sword, its handle twisted and deformed as if it was mere clay.

□ □ □

The first day off since Krena learned how to use her skill rolled around. By now, Allen had gotten quite familiar with his new skill, Awakening.

After repeated attempts to use Awakening on Insect H again after the first time, he had finally succeeded twenty-four hours later. It would have been great if the cooldown time was an hour and not a day, but at the very least, he was relieved to find out that the skill could be used multiple times on each card.

Back in June, he had finally run out of both money and Rank C magic stones. However, he managed to reach Summoning Lvl. 6 before then, so his next short-term goal was clear. Once he could enter Rank B dungeons, there would be plenty of Rank C monsters to gather magic stones from, which he could use to fund more requests for Rank D magic stones through the Guild.

At the moment, Allen was on floor three of a six-floor dungeon. This was where the party was currently picking back up from last week.

“Okay, we’re starting here today,” Allen said.

Krena replied enthusiastically, “All right! Let’s blast right through it!”

Although she was usually cheerful by default, Krena had been in even higher spirits the past few days, ever since she had learned how to use her skill. She was practically quivering with anticipation, eager to use her skill. Allen fully understood how she was feeling.

Thanks to their rounds of the Rank C dungeon bosses, her skill Slash was now at Lvl. 2. This brought her Sword Lord skill to Lvl. 2 as well, which subsequently unlocked Flying Slash, a long-distance single-target attack in the form of—well, a flying slash that was visible to the eye. Slash was also a single-target attack, so Allen was hoping that someone in his party would gain a multi-target attack soon. Furthermore, the true power of both Slash and Flying Slash was still unknown, since the No-life Gamers had no problem defeating the Rank C boss monsters with normal attacks.

When Krena gained Flying Slash, she had also gained the understanding of how to use it. The way she put it, the important thing was to focus on and understand the flow of MP. Unfortunately, this advice did not help Dogora very much—he was still struggling to activate his skill.

“You mentioned you’re experimenting with new Summons today?” Keel asked.

“Yep,” Allen nodded. “Before we head in, please give me a moment.”

Although he still felt a distance with Keel, Allen was making an effort to speak normally with him.

“What’re you doing, Allen?” Krena asked.

Allen grinned. “You want to see? All right! Come on out, Fran!”

Five Bird Cs appeared suddenly, crying, “*Kweeeee*!” in unison. These were cassowaries, flightless birds that towered roughly two meters high and measured two and a half meters from beak to tail. This was considered massive as far as birds went. A large crest crowned their heads, and their muscular legs looked very powerful.

“What huge birds,” Dogora noted. “What’re you going to do with five of them?”

“I’m thinking that we ride them through the dungeon.”

“As in, we get on their backs? Like they’re horses?”

Allen had expected to gain rideable Summons sooner or later. Gaining a mount that made it easier to reach distant places faster was a basic of game design. He thought Bird C was the answer to that need, especially considering that its Ability was named Breakthrough. Today, he was going to put that theory to the test.

“Are these going to be our *hearses*, Master?”

“That’s right, Maria.”

“Your will is my command.”

The Spirit C that had been sitting on Allen’s head floated over to settle on a Bird C’s crest.

The reason why Allen had Summoned Maria was because she asked him to. This Summon was capable of conversation and possessed a strong sense of self. One day, she had told Allen that she wanted to remain Summoned as often as possible. While Allen’s group was at school, she would remain at their base, but just like today, she accompanied them whenever they hit up a dungeon. The thought of being seen in public with a porcelain doll was a bit too embarrassing, so Allen put his foot down on walking the streets with her.

“Frans, lower your backs for everyone to get on.”

Crying in acknowledgment, all the Bird Cs bent their legs and lay down on their bellies.

To show everyone else how it was done, Allen mounted his first—he threw a leg over its back before telling it to stand up.

“Kweee.”

The Bird C complied slowly.

Wow, pretty high up. But this is fine. Gives me a better view of my surroundings.

The dungeons had ceilings more than ten meters high. Even on birdback, Allen did not have to worry about bumping his head. He proceeded to give Fran various instructions, taking it through its paces.

Whoa, it doesn’t bump or shake at all! And the feathers are so soft to sit on!

Riding on Fran turned out to be a completely stable and comfortable experience. There was no doubt that this was a Summon designed to be ridden.

The sight of Allen prancing about on Fran prompted Krena to cry out excitedly, “I wanna try riding one too!”

“All right, go ahead,” Allen nodded. “Let’s power straight through the dungeon!”

Now that they knew it was safe, the rest of the No-life Gamers also mounted Bird Cs. The hesitation that they showed at the start soon gave way to pleasant surprise. So, without further ado, the party set off in their usual formation—Dogora and Krena at the head, Cecil and Keel in the middle, and Allen bringing up the rear. Two Spirits Cs flanked those in the middle to protect them as one Bird E flew overhead to scout.

Heh! “The cavalry’s here!” and all that. Things are really picking up!

One major issue that the party had been struggling with over the past two months was their movement speed. That issue was now resolved, and the possibilities seemed endless. Now, the No-life Gamers had finished off the dungeon boss and were standing before the wooden chest it had dropped, all before lunchtime.

“We made good time today!” Cecil nodded with a sense of achievement.

Krena cheered, “We were so fast!”

Usually, it took this group a whole day to go through one dungeon floor—breaks included—but today, they had gone through two floors in no time at all and had even reached the boss’s room.

I think I have a pretty good grasp on what Fran can do now. It’s incredibly efficient. I can’t wait to Awaken it. Okay, time to sum up my notes.

- Reaches maximum speed of 50 kph
- When its Ability is activated, reaches 100 kph
- Doesn’t tire
- Can’t talk
- Easy to wield sword and ax even while riding
- Can be commanded to listen to orders from someone other than Allen

As Bird C’s torso was not long like that of a horse’s, the rider was still close enough to enemies to comfortably reach with their weapons. In fact, now that they were higher up, Krena and Dogora found it easier to brandish their greatsword and battleax.

“Now all five of us can apply to become Rank C adventurers,” Allen said.

“It went faster than I’d expected,” Cecil agreed.

“Since we finished before noon for once, what do all of you think about having a party to celebrate our promotion back at the base?”

“A party?” For a split second, a look saying, “I can still go on,” flashed across Dogora’s face. However, he thought better of it. “Sure, sounds good.”

“We haven’t had a welcome party for Keel either. What do you say, Keel?” Allen asked warmly. It’s about time we hear what’s up with Keel. This is a good excuse to invite him to our base, if I do say so myself.

“Huh? Uh, that’s a bit...”

“Is there some sort of issue?”

It was clear that Keel had something going on. Allen wanted to take this opportunity to address it. Silence hung in the room until Keel broke it.

“I...actually have a family.”

So it really was family.

The No-life Gamers had been making the rounds killing Rank C dungeon bosses almost every single day, after which Keel always went home with his share of the rewards in hand. Today, the party had cleared their third dungeon, but even with two dungeons, their daily income came to at least forty silver. As wages went, they were rather high.

So, if that was the case, then why was Keel still always so poor? Allen had thought of three possible answers: Keel was in enormous debt, Keel had a family to feed, or Keel was a miser.

Allen recalled there being quite a lot of gamers who really loved money. They would purchase only the bare minimum in weapons and armor and just hoard the rest, regardless of how much they had accrued, be it billions or even hundreds of billions. Allen’s general impression of these players was, “Ah, they must love money in real life too.”

However, although this was another world from the perspective of his past self, it was undoubtedly real life. So he figured it was more likely either the first or second reason.

“Family? Is it a big family?” Allen asked.

“That’s right,” Keel admitted. “There are seven of them.”

Okay yeah, that’s a lot of mouths to feed. If I remember correctly, it’s only students who are exempt from the head tax. Is he sending money to his family back home? Hm? But then that doesn’t explain why he doesn’t want to move in with us.

“Is your family here in Academy City? And you’re the only one who can earn money?”

“N-No, some of them *are* working, but...without any connections or guarantors, it’s hard to find any well-paying jobs.”

Huh? His entire family went to the trouble of moving here with him? But why?

“Oh?” Cecil perked up. “They can help us, Allen.”

“Huh? Oh! Brilliant idea, Cecil! Keel, would you be open to moving into our base?”

Keel looked confused. “What? How does that relate to...?”

Allen proceeded to explain that because they were spending so much time in the dungeons, it was starting to negatively affect the quality of their chores and meals. As there were plenty of rooms in the place still, Allen was now inviting Keel to come live with them with his entire family.

"Of course, we'll also pay them a salary if they choose to work for us."

"Wh-Why are you going so far for me?"

"Because we're friends."

The other three nodded to show their support of Allen's answer. Keel crossed his arms and descended into his thoughts.

Looks like he's a pretty stubborn guy.

Even though his family had been in such financially dire straits, Keel had chosen to keep the matter to himself, not having brought it up even once.

"Then how about this?" Seeing how conflicted Keel was, Cecil suggested splitting all future rewards they received from the dungeon into six equal parts, not five, with the sixth going toward maintenance costs for the base and salary for Keel's family members. In exchange, Allen would keep all the magic stones dropped in the dungeons.

"I see, that *is* a good idea," Dogora agreed.

Krena nodded several times. "Cecil's always so smart!"

All this time, a fifth of the magic stones the party picked up from the dungeons was being given to Keel as a continuation of the terms they had at the start. If his family was moving into the base, however, they would be provided both board and work; the arrangement was presented as an equal exchange for Allen keeping all of the magic stones. With this, there would be no reason for Keel to feel like he was in debt to the rest of the party.

This suggestion finally convinced Keel to look back up. "I'm...sorry to impose, but may I take you up on that offer?"

"Of course!" Allen nodded. "All right, let's go upgrade our adventurer cards and have that party!"

So it was decided that Keel and his family would be moving into the base. The party headed back out of the dungeon and dropped by the Guild to get promoted to Rank C.

When the receptionist handed them their cards, she said, "Congratulations on reaching Rank C. Please be aware that Rank C dungeons are quite different from Rank B ones. I cannot stress enough how important it is to do your research first before giving a Rank B dungeon a try."

Afterward, the party returned to the base while Keel took off to fetch his family. Allen and his friends then began preparing the welcome dinner for Keel's group, who were expected to arrive slightly before twilight. Because there would be young children as well, the party had picked up sweets and fruits in addition to the usual meat and bread on their way back. Along the way home, they had also agreed to take the day off from dungeon delving tomorrow and help Keel's family move all their belongings over instead.

They would also need to buy more dinnerware and daily necessities, among other things.

Great, we've prepared the bare minimum of what's needed. Now Keel is officially a full member of our party!

Up until now, there was a definite feeling of distance that Keel was keeping from the rest of the party; in fact, he rarely spoke directly to anyone other than Allen. Now that he would be living with the rest of them, however, this issue was expected to go away naturally.

Soon, twilight approached. The promised time was near. Allen left the others to make the finishing touches while he headed outside to greet Keel's family. Before long, a group of eight could be seen in the distance, led by Keel.

Huh? They're really young. More like, they're all kids.

Allen had expected Keel's parents as a matter of course and even anticipated grandparents who had difficulty walking. As it turned out, however, there was not a single adult in Keel's group. According to appearances, the youngest was around eight years old and the oldest fifteen, give or take. It was true that fifteen was the age of adulthood in this world, but Allen personally still considered fifteen-year-olds children.

"Sorry, we thought to carry as much as we could. Are we a bit late?"

Keel was shouldering a large wrapping cloth bulging with luggage, whereas the other members of his family also appeared to be holding as much as they could.

"No, no, we only just finished preparing for the party on our end," Allen said reassuringly. "Well then, come on in! I'll show you—"

Suddenly, a young girl who looked roughly ten years old, or around Mash's age, came forward. Her hair—the same color as Keel's—fell over her face as she lowered her head and curtsied gracefully.

"My name is Nina. I thank you truly for your hospitality."

Caught by surprise, Allen barely managed to reply, "R-Right, glad to have you."

The girl's greeting was not that of a commoner, certainly not one that Allen or Krena was familiar with. When Allen looked behind Nina, he realized that he recognized the outfits worn by the other children. The boys wore clothes that bore great similarity to Allen's own uniform back when he was a manservant. Although what the group was wearing was far from being top quality, it was still markedly nicer than what commoners would normally wear.

"Sorry, a lot's happened. I'll tell you more about it later."

"Of course. Come on in."

Despite feeling bewildered, Allen still gestured Keel's family into the base. He directed them to leave their luggage on the first floor for now, then led them into the multipurpose room, which was appropriately spacious for a house designed for twenty occupants.

What a relief the place came furnished.

The long dinner table had enough seats for everyone and was welcomingly loaded with food from end to end. Due to this being an area with lots of adventurers, the majority of readily accessible food tended to seem more hearty in presentation and generous in portion. Sizable meat and bread dishes dotted the tabletop among piles of fruits and sweets.

So began the welcome party that was much more extravagant than Keel had ever imagined.

Chapter 6: Welcome Party

“My, we have guests?” Maria asked as she nonchalantly appeared through the wall.

“*AH!*” Keel shouted in surprise.

Oh right, I forgot to ask her to stay on the second floor.

“She’s so cute!” Nina, Keel’s sister, exclaimed.

“Why, thank you.”

Maria floated over to Nina, who promptly accepted the doll into her arms. The two looked so lovely together that it put a smile on everyone’s faces.

“So then, Keel, everyone, welcome! All right, let’s eat!” Allen kept the toast simple for the sake of the younger children, who were practically drooling.

Krena could not wait any longer either. “Yep, let’s eat! I’m starving!”

Keel and Nina sat down, but the other six members of their family remained standing.

“Huh?” Uh, why aren’t they sitting down?

“You guys, we’ve gone over this. It’s fine. C’mon, let’s eat together.”

“I-If you say so, Master Keel.”

“And stop calling me that.”

“My apologies.”

The fifteen-year-old boy who apologized to Keel so deferentially did not share any of Keel’s facial features, indicating that the two were not related by blood. In fact, among the eight of them, only Keel and Nina had blond hair.

As I’d thought, by “family,” Keel meant that kind of family.

Allen recalled the definition of “family” taught him by Rickel, the head manservant during his time with the Granvelle family—in short, nobles considered full-on servants part of their extended family. Cecil studied the group closely, clearly also having caught on.

“As you can see, we have plenty of food, so eat as much as you want. And if this isn’t enough, there’s even *more* in the kitchen.”

Those words served as the signal for everyone to reach out for the large loaves of bread and various meat dishes on the table. Some of the children must have been famished, with how voraciously they dug in. Once Krena and Dogora also joined the fray, the food on the table disappeared in record time.

Allen heaved a sigh of relief that they had bought extra. There had been so much food that it could not all fit on the table, so there was no need to hold back. Keel’s family started off anxious due to the new environment, but over the course of the meal, they gradually loosened up.

While they were eating, Allen surreptitiously observed the group. Nina appeared to be around ten years old. The other six were three boys and three girls ranging from eight to fifteen years old.

I mean, now it's clear why some of his family members couldn't find work and why Keel was working himself to the bone.

Suddenly, Keel met Allen's eyes.

"I just wanted to say, Allen, this offer to move here is an enormous help. Thank you."

"Of course. We would not have it any other way."

"While we're at it, I also wanted to say that you can be casual with me like you are with the others."

Nice! This feels like a moment someone from a pickup group finally becomes a static party member.

"Okay, will do."

"Thanks."

"Still, I'm pretty surprised that you're a noble," Cecil commented suddenly, with Allen nodding in agreement.

"You can probably tell from how rough I talk, but I never got a noble's education or anything like that. Sorry I kept quiet about it. Just so we're clear, though, I *was* a noble. I'm not anymore."

"Past tense? What happened?"

This conversation between Cecil and Keel was the longest they had ever had since he joined. Part of it was her trying to break the ice with him, but another part was also her trying to understand where he was coming from.

Keel explained that his family had been stripped of their status and broken apart in a recent incident. In spite of everything that had happened, however, he still had his little sister and the young servants who had attended them all this time. They had nowhere else to turn, so Keel had taken them all in under his wing, swearing he would protect their livelihoods.

"Oh dear. I'm sorry for digging up such a painful past."

"Don't worry about it. On the other hand, you seem a lot more like a noble than me, Cecil."

"Hm? I am one, though."

"*What?!*" All of Keel's family looked surprised.

"Didn't we tell you?" Krena mumbled through a mouthful of bread.

She thought back to their first meeting and recalled that they had never properly introduced themselves again after Allen's initial cursory introduction. For his part, Keel had been desperate to get through the dungeons and was not in the right headspace to get to know his new party members.

Some of the former servants instinctively stood up, but Cecil waved them down in a fluster.

"Please don't worry about it, really! We're all equals here in Academy City."

Those servants mumbled, “U-Understood...” and sat back down, albeit hesitantly.

Wait, a noble family that’s been recently stripped of its status...

Just when a thought was forming in Allen’s mind, Nina spoke up. “Keel, are you sure we can live in such a splendid place?” She was clearly trying to change the subject.

Keel nodded. “That’s right. Everyone will be paid a salary if you do the chores and look after the place, so do your best.”

“Understood, sir,” the oldest boy replied, prompting the others to also express their acknowledgment.

I’ll admit I didn’t expect all of them to be so young. Then again, I was only eight when I started as a manservant. Maybe this is just the norm in this world.

“Well, just do as much as you can without pushing yourselves too hard,” Allen said out loud. “We’ll be out a lot of the time, so please hold down the fort while we’re gone.”

A chorus of “understood” rang out from the servants once again. Nina then asked worriedly, “Does that mean you’ll be visiting the dungeons again, Keel?”

The sight of Nina expressing her concern for Keel made Cecil’s face cloud over. It had probably reminded her of herself and Mihai.

“I will. But don’t worry,” Keel reassured her. “Everyone here is super strong.”

“Really?” Nina cast a look at Krena, who was in the middle of tearing off a large piece of bread and shoving it into her mouth.

“So, what’re we gonna do now?” Dogora asked. “Buy furniture like we discussed?”

Allen nodded. “Yup, like we discussed.”

After a simple “Okay,” Dogora returned to gnawing on the large hunk of meat on a bone he was holding.

“Everyone seems rather close,” Nina commented after seeing the exchange between Allen and Dogora.

“Well, me, Krena—that’s Krena—and Dogora over here all grew up in the same village.”

“Oh right, you did mention something like that before,” Keel said, thinking back to when he had first joined.

“Krena and I used to be serfs,” Allen added, deciding to take this opportunity to share a bit more of his life story. “A lot of things happened, and now we’re commoners.”

“Wait, really? I’m sorry if this comes across the wrong way, but...Allen, you don’t come across like a serf at all.”

“Hah, he’s been like that ever since I can remember,” Dogora chuckled. “Everyone in our village said that he doesn’t seem like one at all.”

Krena nodded. “Mm-hm! Allen never changes!”

What?! What was that supposed to mean, Krena?! I've been growing up too!

Keel suddenly came to a realization. "Hm? Wait, if Cecil is a noble...then she didn't come from your village, right? Which means...she's from the noble family that ruled your fiefdom?"

Dogora replied on Allen's behalf. "Yep, Allen went to serve her family as a manservant back when he was eight."

"That's right!" Krena agreed with a bright smile. "I'm so happy we got to be reunited and attend the Academy together!"

"Aww, now I'm kinda jealous," Keel replied with a wistful look. "I wish I had friends from my childhood. By the way, which House were you serving?"

"Granvelle. Did I not say?"

"Gran— Did you just say Granvelle?!" Keel's hand froze and his head whipped around to stare at Cecil. "So that means Cecil is..."

"The young lady of House Granvelle!" Krena finished his sentence for him.

Keel and several of his servants leaped to their feet, their chairs clattering noisily.

"Huh? What's going on?" Krena asked as Allen's group looked on in bewilderment.

"Lady Nina, p-please stay behind me!"

The oldest servant assumed a position between Allen and Nina, trying to move the young girl away. However, everything was happening so suddenly that even Nina was discombobulated, as were the youngest children.

"But that means..." Keel looked at Cecil with disbelief in his face. "No, you're lying!"

Cecil returned his look, mystified. "I'm not quite sure what you're saying, but I am Cecil Granvelle, daughter of Viscount Granvelle."

Keel's face was filled with such hatred it was as if he was looking at his family's mortal enemy. "So *you're* the young lady of House Granvelle!"

"I am. And you...are the son of Viscount Carnel, I take it?"

"That's right! Viscount Carnel is my father! How dare you! How dare you tear my family apart!"

Keel was in a blinding rage with his teeth bared in naked hostility. Conversely, Cecil, who seemed to have come to a realization, remained entirely calm.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on here?" Dogora looked back and forth between the two repeatedly.

"Oh right, you don't know about the incident last year. House Granvelle and House Carnel from our neighboring fiefdom got into...a quarrel, let's say," Allen explained.

Both Dogora and Krena knew nothing about the fight over mithril mining rights that had taken place between the two noble families last year. It was

hardly something to be shared offhandedly, but Allen determined that this situation required at least a brief summary of events.

To think that Keel was from House Carnel. I mean, he did say his family got stripped of its status recently. When I think about it now, the chances of us bumping into someone from Viscount Carnel's family here in Academy City were actually quite high.

It was not by sheer coincidence that Keel was in the same class as Cecil. To keep things simpler, the twenty thousand student applicants had been sorted by where they had lived. A lot of the students in this class came from the fiefdoms of Count Hamilton—Rifol's family—Viscount Granvelle, and former Viscount Carnel.

Tension filled the air between Allen's and Keel's groups. So, Allen took out a dagger from Storage. It was the silver ornamented one that indicated his status as a guest of House Granvelle.

"I contributed quite a bit to taking down House Carnel during that incident. And this is what I received in reward." He held it up so that Dogora and Krena could also see it clearly.

"Whoa. It's my first time hearing the reason why you became a guest of House Granvelle." Dogora sounded impressed.

At the same time, however, Keel seemed on the verge of bursting a blood vessel. "What do you mean you contributed?! What did you do?!"

Huh? Did Keel not hear the details of what happened?

"I gave Viscount Granvelle advice on how to get the royal family on his side. I also gave him my mithril mining rights and told him that if he used them, he'd be able to crush House Carnel for sure. Obviously, it worked. And this is what I got for it."

Allen waved the dagger around nonchalantly.

"Y-YOU! *YOUUUUUU!*"

Good, good, his hatred is directed at me now. 'Cause honestly, none of what happened was Cecil's fault anyway.

The hostility that Keel was bearing toward Allen triggered a reaction from Spirit C. The doll, which was still in Nina's arms, gradually stopped smiling. Allen found out just how scary Maria looked without her smile.

Whoa there, Maria, do NOT attack them.

Despite remaining stone-faced, Maria nodded slightly.

Suddenly, Cecil cut in. "Allen, this is a problem between House Granvelle and House Carnel."

"Huh?"

"You don't deserve to be hated by someone from House Carnel for what happened. That dagger is an expression of gratitude from all of House Granvelle for saving me from former Viscount Carnel's savagery."

"'S-Savagery'?! Just what are you accusing my family of?!"

"Oh? Do you not know what happened? But even so, if you're from a noble family, you should know that your current attitude is unbecoming. Would you mind taking a seat?"

"What do you mean I don't know?! I heard it all from the royal envoy! He said that House Carnel was destroyed because of House Granvelle's scheming!"

"That is not how you ask for an explanation. *Sit!*"

Allen watched silently as Cecil reined Keel in.

"If I sit down, you'll tell me what happened?"

"Very well. But you must also tell me what happened with you."

Cecil wanted to know Keel's circumstances, as she thought it strange that he had been kept in the dark. Furthermore, she also asked him to share his aim for attending the Academy despite being so destitute. Getting the full picture was very important to her, especially when he had just hinted at the fact that he was tied to a royal envoy. For all she knew, the House Granvelle Affair might not be entirely over yet.

"Okay. Tell me, then."

Keel finally sat back down, but Cecil cast a look at Nina and the servants.

"Please have the others step outside, Keel. This is for your ears only."

"Y-You mustn't listen to her!" The oldest servant protested vehemently. Keel gave him a look, then turned back toward Cecil.

"Why can't they hear this? They're all my family."

"This is a matter that involves House Granvelle as well. It's not for just anyone to hear."

Silence filled the air. Eventually, the other fifteen-year-old servant—a lady-in-waiting, by the looks of it—took the initiative to herd everyone else outside, saying, "Let's go." She had likely caught the implication behind Cecil's words. Allen watched through Sharing as Nina also headed to the third floor with the servants.

Suddenly, the multipurpose room felt a lot more spacious with there being only the five members of the No-life Gamers present. Krena and Dogora also made to leave the room, but Cecil asked them to stay and listen.

Cecil began with a caveat: "Everything that I'm sharing is the truth, but it's up to you whether to believe it or not." She then proceeded to give a full account of the House Granvelle Affair.

Viscount Carnel had come to the Granvelle mansion with a royal envoy, bringing talk of so-called joint management of the mithril mines in the White Dragon Mountains. Lord Granvelle had turned the offer down, but that same day, three men assaulted the mansion and kidnapped Cecil, bringing her to the Carnel fiefdom on a magic ship.

As her telling continued, Keel protested several times, saying, "That can't be true!" but Cecil admonished him each time.

After they had escaped from the ship, Cecil and Allen had gone on the run, chased by a hit man hired by Viscount Carnel. Unfortunately, the man caught up with them halfway to Granvelle City. Just as he was about to kill

them, Knight Captain Zenof arrived in the nick of time and took out the hit man instead.

After the two of them safely returned home, then-Baron Granvelle had gone straight to the royal family, appealing for justice. In order to ensure that the royal family would take action, he had expressed his willingness to part with the proceeds of a mithril mine. Consequently, Viscount Carnel and the many others who had been in cahoots with him were imprisoned, with his wife now under house arrest in a villa close to the royal palace. The ensuing investigation turned up evidence that incriminated many other nobles in his political faction, leading to their incarceration or being stripped of their peerage.

"And that's all I know," Cecil concluded. "How different is that from what you know?"

"Th-That's... You must be lying."

Wow, Viscount Granvelle really went all out, huh?

This was actually also Allen's first time hearing the full details of the incident last year known as "the House Granvelle Affair." Even today, it was whispered about with fear among the nobles of Ratash. The reason why Cecil made Nina and the others leave the room was because she did not want them to hear of the terrible deeds that Viscount Carnel had committed.

"As I said at the start, you are free to disbelieve me. If you want, you can head to the royal capital and investigate for yourself. If you ask, I'm sure they'll at least show you the contract for joint management of the mines with your father's signature on it."

Keel hung his head in shock. He needed more time to process everything he had just heard.

"Now it's your turn. Will you let us know what you're here in Academy City for?"

With difficulty, Keel lifted his eyes from the table. "I...right. The reason why I'm here in Academy City. It's...a bit of a long story. That okay with you?"

Apparently the story went much further back than just what happened last year.

"That's fine," Cecil nodded.

"Well..."

Keel's account came in bits and pieces. When he was born, his father, Viscount Carnel, had assigned him an army of servants and given him absolutely everything he wanted. However, that all changed when he turned five: his Appraisal Ceremony revealed that he possessed the Cleric Talent. Keel said that he still vividly remembered how, amidst the crowd of smiles and the chorus of blessings, his father alone had a look of sheer despair on his face. Soon after that, Keel was abruptly expelled from the mansion and sent to live in a different city within the fiefdom, attended to by only a

handful of servants. He was never told so in so many words, but this had apparently been on the orders of the viscount himself.

Cecil looked pensive as she compared Keel's story with her own upbringing.

Keel then spent the next seven years in his new home without receiving any of the education that noble children normally did. In addition, the amount of money the viscount sent for living expenses was extremely limited. His little sister, Nina, was the only one who stayed in contact, visiting him once every month with her own servants in tow. In spite of his treatment, she continued looking up to him as her older brother.

When Keel turned ten, a tutor was finally dispatched to him. All at once, he learned that all noble children with Talents were obligated to attend the Academy, so he would *have* to pass the entrance exam. That was the moment Keel realized, with both relief and melancholy, that his father still considered him part of his family.

At the end of last year, a royal envoy unceremoniously barged into the place where Keel was living with his servants. Without allowing Keel time to properly process what was happening, he had asked if Keel was Viscount Carnel's son and if he had the Cleric Talent. When Keel replied in the affirmative to both, the envoy then told him that Keel would receive money to attend the Academy and informed him of what had occurred within the Carnel fiefdom. Lastly, the envoy had said, "His Majesty promises that if you serve your duty as a noble for five years after graduating, you can restore House Carnel as its new family head."

The way the envoy put it, all Talented nobles had a duty to fight in a dangerous place crawling with monsters for three years. Due to the enormity of House Carnel's crimes, Keel would have to serve for an extra two years to fully redeem his family's name. When Allen heard this, he recalled that five years was the longest a Talented criminal could be sentenced to the battlefield for.

Keel continued his story. He had immediately accepted the envoy's offer, then asked if he could bring Nina—as well as the servants who had also lost their home—with him to Academy City. The man gave his permission, telling Keel he could do as he pleased. After that, Keel had returned to Carnel City and served at a church there until April. He did not have to worry about paying tuition, as that was being covered by the royal family, but the money for living expenses at the Academy had all gone toward moving his whole family.

"All my life, I'd hated this Talent of mine, because it was the source of all my suffering. But it turned out there was a reason why it was given to me. There really was a reason after all..."

Keel grew overcome with emotion. Everyone remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

"I *must* restore House Carnel. I'll become the family head and make a place for my family to call home. I'll do whatever it takes."

And so Keel ended on that resolute note. Both Krena and Dogora had sorrowful looks on their faces.

The fact that there was a royal envoy still making shady maneuvers after House Carnel's been taken down means two things: one, that there's at least one royal envoy that slipped through the investigation, and two, that the mastermind is probably still at large. However, before that, there's something more important to confirm.

"By the way, Keel, did the envoy tell you more about exactly where it is that has so many monsters roaming around?"

"Huh? Why're you asking that?"

As I'd thought. The envoy only gave him the impression that there are just a few more monsters around, expecting that he'd eventually learn Demon Lord history at the Academy. And once he was enrolled, he'd be basically trapped in the system.

"So he didn't tell you. But well, that works out great for us. I see, so you *do* have the noble's duty."

If you'd only told me earlier!

"Huh?! What do you mean by it working out great?!"

"Y'see, Cecil and Krena also have the same duty."

Allen explained that since Cecil was also born as a noble and Krena had the Sword Lord Talent, they also had a duty to fight. Although Dogora and Allen himself would not be conscripted, they still planned on going to this "place with lots of monsters" to protect the other two.

"So what?" Keel asked sharply, glaring at Allen as if asking him to get to the point.

"So let's serve the duty together."

"Wh-What're you saying?! Were you *listening* to me?! I'm Viscount Carnel's son!"

"Oh, that? I don't mind."

"'Oh, that'?!" Keel was so shocked, he fell speechless.

Now this makes a lot more sense. I did think it strange to bump into a new recruit who seemed to have motivations so perfectly aligned with my own. This is more how I'd imagine things to go in real life.

In many of the games Allen had played in his previous life, the game developers practically showered the player with companions. The further along players got, the more companions joined them. As the player, he would just hit up the bar in the starting town and—lo and behold!—he would make a new friend who conveniently had a backstory that served as a source of resolve to accompany the player to the very end of the game and fight the final boss.

A few years into his life in this world, Allen realized this was not how real life actually went. Case in point, what the boy—for Keel was still only a twelve-year-old boy—currently before him wanted was to restore his family name for the sake of his sister and servants. That had nothing to do with defeating the Demon Lord.

“You might not have heard, Keel, but half of the people who head to that ‘place with a lot of monsters’ die within three years. Seventy percent in five years. Almost all the monsters there are Rank B or higher. Did the royal envoy mention that at all?”

Keel’s eyes widened in astonishment as he shook his head. Everyone in this world understood just how much of a threat Rank B monsters posed.

Naturally, he wasn’t told about the strength of the monsters nor about the Demon Lord. I see...

However, despite having faltered a short while upon hearing about the Rank B monsters, Keel quickly gathered himself. He replied, “That doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change what I have to do.”

I figured he’d say that. He did say he’d do whatever it takes.

It was now clear that Keel felt that protecting his family was his calling.

“Well, that’s the kind of place we’ll be going to. We’re frequenting the dungeons in preparation precisely because we know how dangerous it’s gonna be. Three years is nothing. They’ll fly by in the blink of an eye.”

“So that’s why...” Understanding dawned on Keel’s face as he also finally learned what was motivating Allen’s group.

“Keel, come with us. Let’s fight together. Although our goals may be different, we’ll be doing the same thing. Isn’t that good enough?”

I’ve basically described the Demon Lord Army to him, but we can tell him about the Demon Lord another time. It’d just complicate things revealing the entire Demon Lord history to him right now. In the first place, I don’t think it’ll take us five whole years to kill the Demon Lord. He’ll be able to go home sooner than five years, if all goes well.

“Fight...together?”

“That’s right. It’s totally fine for you to fight for your own goals.”

Keel looked torn. He could walk out on this deal if he wanted, but doing so meant returning Nina and his servants to their life of poverty. It was clear what he ought to do—as the future head of House Carnel.

“I-I’ll use all of you for my own goals, okay? Even if you’re a Sword Lord or whatever else you may be. For the sake of my family, I’ll take advantage of your fighting abilities. So...you sure about this?”

“Mm-hm! Let’s fight together!” Reacting to the mention of her Talent, Krena held out a hand toward Keel with a bright smile.



Allen nodded. “Then it’s decided. Glad to have you on board, Keel. Cecil, Dogora, is this fine with you?” Although most things went as Allen suggested, he always made sure to make important decisions as a group.

“Well, I admit I never expected to be living together with someone from House Carnel. I’d probably be the first ever member of House Granvelle to do so.”

“It’s cool with me. Honestly, y’all lost me halfway through. All I know is that Keel is now our companion. That’s enough for me.”

“All right, back to the dinner,” Allen said. “You guys aren’t done eating yet, right? Let’s continue the welcome party.”

“I’ll go call everyone back down!” Krena was already out the door and pounding up the stairs.

“Wh-What on...” Keel simply stared blankly, caught off guard by how abruptly the No-life Gamers had moved on.

“You just have to get used to it,” Cecil sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

Chapter 7: Traps and More Testing

And so it was decided that Keel, his sister Nina, and the servants who used to serve House Carnel would be moving into the No-life Gamers' home base. When Keel first announced this, the fifteen-year-old servant boy looked like he wanted to protest. After Keel had a talk with him, however, he made no further comment.

The next day was spent entirely on helping Keel's group move house as well as purchasing any daily necessities such as bedding. The salary of the six servants was also determined, with the rates set according to their ages.

- 15yo gentleman-in-waiting: 1 gold
- 15yo lady-in-waiting: 1 gold
- 10yo manservant: 50 silver
- 10yo maidservant: 50 silver
- 8yo houseboy: 20 silver
- 8yo housemaid: 20 silver

Their salaries were fixed, but there was no change to the rule of dedicating a sixth of all earnings from the dungeons to the base's maintenance costs and living expenses. The idea was to cover all expenditures with dungeon loot.

With the addition of a Cleric, everything seemed to be going great with the party. This was not entirely true, however. The main reason was because of the way that Viscount Carnel had decided to handle Keel.

Nobles generally reacted in one of two ways when the Appraisal Ceremony identified their children as Talented. Some would lament their child's fate and do whatever they could to get their child exempted from their duty. This was what Viscount Granvelle had chosen. He had rushed to reopen the mithril mines in his realm in hopes of offering them to the king in exchange for his daughter's exemption.

The majority, however, welcomed their Talent as a blessing. This was because, for nobles who returned after successfully fulfilling their duty, the benefits were simply too great. It was far easier for veterans to be appointed to positions at the royal palace, and former combatants who went on to become head of their houses were granted tax cuts.

Take Rifol, for example. He was a slender and fragile-looking boy who had been born to House Hamilton, an esteemed family that had a history of producing generations of exemplary generals. If things remained as they were currently, chances were high that his family would lose their prestige with his generation. However, the Ceremony determined that he had the Swordsman Talent. If he attended the Academy and fulfilled his three years of duty, he would surely return home a changed man, with all the advantages from service to boot. At least, this was what his family expected,

and his father had joyfully sent him off to the Academy. Nobles who prioritized the prosperity of their house generally welcomed their children’s Talents.

But what had happened to Keel was neither of the above. When Allen first heard Keel’s story, he thought Viscount Carnel was sending his treasured son far away to hide him from the royal family. However, the living conditions that he then provided his son did not match that profile. What was more, the visit from the royal envoy made no sense within the context of this narrative either. Further investigation was needed, starting with whether the envoy’s claim of the royal promise to restore House Carnel was even real in the first place.

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A few days later, Allen and his companions visited the reference room on the third floor of the Adventurer’s Guild to look up information on Rank B dungeons. When they had applied for their promotion to Rank C, the receptionist had told them that an inordinately large number of adventurers died within the first year of reaching Rank C. She added that their causes of death were more often traps than combat. Allen, Cecil, Dogora, and Keel were now researching the kinds of traps that existed and their respective countermeasures.

“I-I’ll look stuff up too,” Krena insisted, on the verge of tears.

Allen shook his head and, without even looking up from the resource on traps he was going through, replied firmly, “No, you memorize everything in front of you instead.”

“Ugh... You’re such a meanie...”

Krena had her own separate task: to study for the written general education exam that would be taking place next month. The first year curriculum at the Academy specially emphasized general education. The Demon Lord Army had a proper chain of command and moved under instructions from above, meaning that the Allied forces sometimes had to suddenly change strategies with no advance notice. If the soldiers did not have a basic command of language and common knowledge, it would be difficult for them to keep up with the rapid-fire commands from their superiors.

A while later, all five came together to share what they had learned.

“This trap summons dozens of Rank C monsters all around if you step on it,” Dogora reported. According to the page he had opened up to, there were small rooms inside the dungeons with camouflaged switches on the ground that, when stepped on, would call out anywhere from five to thirty monsters all at once; most of the monsters generated by summoning-type traps in Rank B dungeons were Rank C.

Keel was the next up. “As for the variety of traps, the most common ones cause Poison or Sleep or just straight-up shoot arrows. I haven’t learned the Antidote spell yet, though. Are we not going to hire a Scout?”

"I don't think we should expand our party any more for a while yet." After all, even if we hire someone, they probably wouldn't follow us to fight the Demon Lord.

In the first place, Allen felt like the party already had enough resources to make do without a Scout. First, he himself had Summons with Abilities that made them highly suited for scouting. Next, although Keel had yet to learn any spells that could dispel status debuffs, it was likely that he would somewhere down the line; that would give the party a means of dealing with poison from traps or monsters. Furthermore, Allen always kept Garnishes, the product of Grass C's Ability, on hand. Lastly, herbs to fend off Poison and Sleep did exist, so the party could also manage by visiting an apothecary regularly for now.

Allen proceeded to share what he had found out. "We can expect to see monsters that use poison, like death spiders. There are also Rank B monsters called mimics that pretend to be treasure chests; let's make a point to kill all of those we come across."

Rank B dungeons were all differentiated by monster—such as insect-type monsters, spirit-type monsters, and so on—with each type requiring unique precautions. For example, having a way to counteract Poison and Paralysis when entering dungeons swarming with insects was as important as having ways to deal magic damage in a dungeon full of spirit-type monsters, which were generally highly resistant to physical attacks. One monster found in all Rank B dungeons, however, was the mimic. According to records, adventurer casualties to mimics were incredibly high.

"You serious?" Keel asked doubtfully. "We're killing *all* the mimics?"

"They apparently drop rare items," Allen replied.

"I see! Then we shouldn't miss a single one!"

Once Keel heard the words "rare items," all his apprehensions about danger dissipated and he immediately threw his support behind Allen. Money, valuable equipment, and MP Recovery Rings were important objectives for the No-life Gamers. According to records, mimics could drop items that went for over a hundred gold apiece.

"In the first place, what even are these dungeons?" Cecil murmured while looking at a very aged scroll. "Apparently they've existed for more than a thousand years."

Hm? Cecil's research seems to have taken a very different direction than the rest of ours.

In his previous life as Kenichi, Allen had almost never bothered himself with the backstories in games. After all, no matter how grand the plot, what he had to do was still the same: level up and get stronger. If he had to clear a tower, the question of why the tower existed would never even cross his mind.

Cecil shared what she had learned. As it turned out, dungeons were located all over Ratash, Giamut—the entire world, in fact. Some people

theorized that they existed to attract adventurers, but there was no way to know the truth.

“However, strangely enough, I can’t find any records at all of dungeons that date prior to a thousand years ago.”

Krena asked for the scroll and started reading through it. “Hmm, I see.”

“So, did you finish studying for the test, Krena?”

“Hmmmmm, I seeeeee,” Krena replied in a drawn-out voice, covering her face with the parchment.

“All right, that means you’ll be hitting the books again when we get back, Kre—”

The pink-haired girl suddenly leaped to her feet and dashed toward the exit. However, Allen managed to grab her in time. For now, at least, Allen still had higher Agility than her.

“*Heguhhh...*” Krena made a sound like her life was ending and hung her head.

Cecil, Dogora, and Keel all cast her looks of pity but otherwise made no move to help.

Now that we’re done researching, let’s give a Rank B dungeon a try.

For now, though, Allen dragged Krena off to a different kind of dungeon, one that involved a lot more glaring at books.

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“Nina, you sure you don’t wanna let Maria free while you’re eating at least?”

“She’s okay. She prefers being on my lap. Right, Maria?”

“Y-Yes, *death’s* right...”

The gang was currently having breakfast and, seeing Maria once again on Nina’s lap, Keel had gently admonished her, but to no effect. Ever since Nina had moved in, she had not let go of Maria. Allen had no idea if this was compensating for how lonely she had been before or if she had simply taken a liking to Spirit C; either way, she always kept the doll close at hand.

Looks like Nina’s completely latched on to Maria. I’ve never had a pet cat before, but I imagine this is probably similar to how that feels? Allen thought nonchalantly as if this problem did not concern him.

Five days had passed since Keel and his family joined the No-life Gamers in their home. Allen had taken the time to tell Keel about the Demon Lord, but the boy did not fully believe it. Awkward moments did crop up here and there, but when compared to the commotion on the first day, it could easily be said that both sides were warming up to each other.

Every day, the party visited all three Rank C dungeons that they had already cleared to fight their final bosses. These gave them a daily income of roughly three gold, which worked out to fifty silver per person plus fifty silver to cover food and housing expenses. They were now much better off in both time and money.

“Everyone, get ready,” Allen called out as they were finishing. “Remember, we’re starting a Rank B dungeon today.”

“Let’s do our best!” Krena cried, leaping to her feet with exponentially more energy than what she normally displayed while studying.

Everyone else expressed their acknowledgment in their own way and wrapped up their meal. Afterward, Nina saw them off with a distraught expression, so Keel gave her a few reassuring pats on the head. This was fast becoming a ritual for them whenever he headed out to a dungeon.

There were two Rank B dungeons close to the base, each containing a different kind of monster. The one that the No-life Gamers were heading to today was inhabited by beast-type monsters. Their attacks were easier to read and generally did not deal debuffs. This left traps and treasure chests as the only sources of poison. This particular dungeon was often recommended to newly promoted Rank C adventurers as a good one to start off with.

A short walk from the base later, the dungeon reared into view. The adventurers lined up outside looked markedly more powerful than those who had been waiting to get into the Rank C dungeons.

It was said that eighty percent of adventurers were able to take on Rank C dungeons; however, only around twenty percent could handle Rank B. Many had already died and more would continue to die to the innumerable traps and terrifying enemies within. Even when a group reached the deepest level, only those with Talents could even dream of defeating the boss that lay in wait. This here was a wall that truly separated the Talented from the Talentless.

The sight of young students—and only five of them!—approaching the dungeon cut such an unusual sight that one of the staff on duty asked them if they needed any help. Allen answered, “We’re totally fine” as the whole group produced their Rank C adventurer cards and walked on through.

`“Welcome to this Rank B dungeon. I am General Dungeon Operating System B304.”`

The party found a cube floating in midair when they stepped into one of the rooms, just as in the Rank C dungeons. They asked it to transport them inside.

With his ax propped on his shoulder, Dogora looked around, studying the stones that made up the ceiling, floor, and walls. “This feels the same as one of the Rank C places.”

Allen nodded. “That might be, but there are now traps. Let’s proceed carefully.”

Just in case, everyone started off drinking an Antidote Potion. Each cost a rather steep three silver, but they lasted a full day. As they did so, Allen sent out a Bird E to scout ahead.

The following were general notes that Allen had written down in his grimoire about Rank B dungeons.

- `Rank B dungeons have 10 to 12 floors`

- One floor of a Rank B dungeon takes twelve hours to traverse
- The upper floors are filled with Rank D monsters, whereas the lower floors are filled with Rank C monsters
- The boss on the deepest floor is Rank B

So, this dungeon has twelve floors. On average, people walk five kilometers per hour. If, at that pace, it takes twelve hours to get through one floor, that means 660 hours are needed to reach the eleventh floor. And that's not including the time it'd take to hunt down all the mimics we come across. Well, that's plenty of time to test out a bunch of things with my newest Summons.

"All right, I've gotten a general grasp of the layout of the place. Come on out, Frans."

"Kweeeee!"

The group started moving forward without activating Breakthrough. Although there were only Rank D monsters on this floor, they decided not to charge their way through, taking into account the traps that they would have to deal with. Even so, they managed to reach the second floor by noon despite having entered at around eight.

"We didn't see any treasure chests. I thought they'd be more common," Cecil grumbled while eating her bread. Even this noble young lady had gotten quite used to eating out in the open after two months doing so.

Allen shrugged. "Well, at the end of the day, our top priority is still reaching the lowest floor. I guess there just aren't all that many chests lying around."

After passing through one more floor that afternoon, the party finally spotted what they had been looking out for on the fourth floor.

"Look! A treasure chest!"

Just as Keel was about to charge into a small chamber with a treasure chest in the far end, everyone grabbed him and pulled him back. They had taken precautions against being Poisoned, but there was still a possibility this chest was a mimic.

"Maria, would you mind checking it?"

"Your will is my command!"

The porcelain doll floated toward the chest. Allen's strategy was to have Spirit C, which could phase through matter as well as converse normally, handle checking for traps in chests. If a chest did turn out to be a trap, they would just pass it by.

Everyone watched the Spirit C with their hearts in their mouths. Keel was on standby, ready to cast Healing Magic—which was also effective on Summons—at a moment's notice. The more he leveled, the less the party had to rely on Allen's recovery items.

[redacted]

Name: Keel
Age: 12
Class: Cleric
Level: 30
HP: 397
MP: 749
Attack: 298
Endurance: 421
Agility: 479
Intelligence: 661
Luck: 603
Skills: Cleric {2}, Healing {2}, Solidity {2}, Sword Mastery {3}
Extra Skill: Drops of God
XP: 26,550/30,000
Skill LevelsCleric: 2
Healing: 2
Solidity: 2
Skill ExperienceHealing: 28/100
Solidity: 15/100

[redacted]

I'm glad to see his skills are improving steadily. If I remember right, he said he learned Healing by repeatedly praying at a church, right?

When he joined the party, Keel's Cleric and Healing skills were both only at Lvl. 1. Just like Cecil, it was only once he reached Lvl. 10 that his class skill had gone up. This proved that both Healing and Attack Magic had level caps. One additional thing had come to light: Healing Magic was dependent on the Intelligence stat.

In the time it took all of the above to go through Allen's mind, Maria had finally reached the chest. Allen Shared her view to examine it closely. It indeed appeared to be a common wooden chest, but it could still be rigged or a mimic. If it was rigged, they would pass it by; if it was safe, they would open it. But what if it was a mimic?

Maria placed her hands on the wooden chest.

"GAAAWWWRRRRRRR!" The treasure chest's mouth suddenly burst open, revealing countless rows of jagged teeth.

"It's a mimic!" Allen shouted.

"AHHHH! D-*DIE!* PSYCHOKINESIS!" Maria screamed in surprise at suddenly finding herself under attack. She generated gray volleyball-sized energy spheres from her hands and started throwing them at the mimic with incredible velocity.

"G-Gaaawrrr?!"

"DIE! DIE! DIE!"

Every time Psychokinesis landed, the monster went flying. Even when it slammed against the wall, Spirit C continued raining down attacks without mercy. It did not take long for the mimic to stop moving. It had died.

<You have defeated 1 mimic. You have earned 20,000 XP.>

I see, I see. When Strengthened, Maria can kill a Rank B monster using slightly less than half of her MP.

"Hold on a... What?! Mimics are Rank B monsters, right?!" Dogora exclaimed.

As Spirit C's MP gauge would fill back up after six hours, the group now knew for certain they could easily kill two mimics within each six-hour period.

"Yay! A spear appeared!"

When the mimic disappeared, it left behind a Rank B magic stone and a mithril spear. Apparently, it really was true that mimics would sometimes drop items. Krena clambered down from her Bird C to pick up both. This single weapon would probably sell for around fifty gold.

The No-life Gamers then continued making their way deeper into the Rank B dungeon.

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With a gasp, Allen abruptly woke up. He was lying on the stone pavement. He looked around and found his companions peering at him.

"Are you back with us? You sure you don't want to drink a Rousing Potion?"

Oh, did a trap get me with the Sleep debuff? I've been waiting for this!

They were currently in a small room on the sixth floor. Allen was the only one in the party who, for the sake of his experiments, had not drunk any of a potion that granted Sleep immunity.

"Did you use Garnish on me, Maria?"

"Yes, Master."

"How long did it take me to wake up?"

"Fewer than ten heartbeats, Master."

So only a few seconds. And I'm not groggy at all; I'm wide awake. Which means I can get back into battle immediately.

"What happened, Allen?" Krena asked anxiously.

"Nothing, everything's great," Allen replied. "I want to do a bit more testing using this trap. Is that okay with you guys?"

"Ah, testing? Okay," Cecil nodded.

"Okay, take your time." Dogora picked up his ax. "Krena, train with me?"

"Sure!"

Everyone accepted Allen's request with an accustomed air. These experiments were a common occurrence when down in the dungeons with Allen. Although getting to the end of the dungeon was a priority, his ability to properly analyze all the possible threats they encountered had proved crucial to their survival many times. Plus, there was still a lot that he had yet to learn about his Rank C Summons and the Awakening skill.

So, knowing that Allen's experiment sessions could run as long as several hours, Dogora immediately asked Krena to spar with him. Although he had yet to figure out how to use his skill, he believed that if he repeatedly swung his ax at her while trying to form the correct mental image—basically having Krena do what Dverg had done for her—he would eventually get the knack of it. The two of them managed to find one or two hours for this training every day on top of their daily dungeon runs after school.

This time, Allen was studying the Sleep debuff. Or rather, he was using the Sleep debuff to study the effects of Grass C's Ability, Garnish. After obtaining items to recover HP and MP from earlier Summons, he figured that this one was supposed to dispel debuffs. There were plenty of traps in this Rank B dungeon, but all of them had been either arrows or poison so far—for these the party simply went with a brute-force approach with the help of items. Allen could not test either of those kinds, as he could die if anything went wrong, so he had been waiting for a Sleep trap all this time.

This one's also really cleverly disguised.

As the other four spread out inside the room, Allen headed back out to examine the trap in the middle of the corridor. The trap looked completely indistinguishable from the surrounding stone pavement. According to Maria, when it was stepped on, it would depress and trigger the release of some white smoke. Allen purposely stepped on the trap once more. Sure enough, it released a cloud of smoke.

Okay, it's the same style as the Poison traps. The range is five meters from the trap itself, and the cloud dissipates after a few seconds. Hmm, I don't feel sleepy at all. Is this due to Garnish? If so, then Garnish works differently from commercial Rousing Potions.

Effect of Commercial Rousing Potions

- Wakes up someone who's asleep
- If drunk in advance, can protect the drinker from the Sleep debuff for one day
- Effect can only trigger once
- Costs 3 silver

In contrast, the effect of Garnish did not wear off even after it had worked once. Allen activated the trap a third time, but nothing happened to him. Just as he was scratching his face, trying to think of other things to confirm, he realized that he had a little bit of dried blood close to his mouth.

Huh? I got hurt? When— Oh wait, before I blacked out...

An important fact came back to Allen: he had been on the move when he had fallen asleep. And a Bird C could run at fifty kilometers per hour even without using its Ability.

Did I fall off of Fran when I lost consciousness?

"Maria, what happened to all the Frans when the smoke triggered?"

"They all fell dead asleep."

According to Maria, since all of the Bird Cs had been running together, all of them had fallen victim to the trap at the same time. As the other No-life Gamers had all drunk Rousing Potions in addition to the Antidotes beforehand, they had been able to leap off their mounts in the nick of time and were thus uninjured. He himself, however, had collapsed with his mount and gotten scratched up in the process.

Allen checked his grimoire—everyone's HP stat, including his own, was full.

"Keel healed me?"

"Yes, Master."

I see. He must have used Healing Magic on all the Frans and me. Oh boy, that was a close one. Both times just now, I saw Maria get enveloped in the smoke and remain unaffected, so I unconsciously assumed that all my Summons are resistant to Sleep.

Allen called out various Summons and had them step on the trap one by one in order to confirm which ones were and were not affected by it. As a result, he learned that their resistance was based on their type, regardless of rank.

Effectiveness of Sleep

- Insect-type: 100%
- Beast-type: 100%
- Bird-type: 100%
- Grass-type: 0%
- Stone-type: 0%
- Fish-type: 100%
- Spirit-type: 0%

I see. So the trap is basically guaranteed to work on living creatures, but is ineffective on the nonliving ones. Grass-types are alive, but because they're plants, they don't sleep, I guess?

The pattern was clear and easy to understand. The next logical thing to do was to see whether Garnish worked on the Summons.

Findings on Garnish

- Can dispel the Sleep debuff
- Works on Summons too
- Effect is sustained

Requires Further Testing

- Does it dispel the Poison debuff?
- How long does the effect last?

Since it lasts, it makes sense to consume one beforehand. Still, it looks like I put everyone in danger, not having thought about the possibility of the Frans falling asleep too.

Having just finished his tests, Allen was about to turn around and say, “Thanks for waiting. I’m done now. Let’s go,” when Dogora suddenly roared at the top of his lungs.

“HECK YEEEEAAAAHHHHHH!!! I DID IT! WOO-HOOOOOO!”

“Yay! You did it, Dogora!” Krena cheered.

Immediately catching on, Allen asked, “You managed to activate your skill?”

“You bet! I did it! I used my skill!”

A smile spread across Dogora’s bumpkin face, reaching from ear to ear. He had figured out how to use his skill only a little later than Krena.

Allen checked his grimoire. Oh! He really did earn Skill XP!

```
Name: Dogora
Age: 12
Class: Ax User
Level: 35
HP: 772
MP: 416
Attack: 1,016
Endurance: 670
Agility: 424
Intelligence: 282
Luck: 458
Skills: War Ax {1}, Full Might {1}, Ax Mastery {4}
Extra Skill: Heart and Soul
XP: 59,630/70,000
Skill LevelsWar Ax: 1
Full Might: 1
   Skill ExperienceFull Might: 2/10
```

“Hm? You done with your tests, Allen?” Dogora had been so occupied with his training that he had only just noticed that Allen had packed away everything he had taken out to do his tests with.

“Yep, all good. Thanks for waiting, guys.”

“Nice. Let’s keep going, then! I want to use my skill a few more times so I make sure to remember how it feels!” Dogora promptly hoisted his ax and hopped onto his Bird C’s back.

After Allen said, “Sounds good,” the party once again resumed pushing forward through the dungeon.

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Today was a day off.

“Pochi, good boy! Who’s a good boy? You’re a good boy!”

“Arf! Arf!”

Allen was petting a Beast F, which was waving its tail enthusiastically. Unlike its usual giant and threatening appearance, it was tiny and fluffy like a chihuahua. From up on top of a cupboard, a Beast E watched with a judgmental look on its face, as if asking, “What’s so fun about that?” Just like Beast F, it was no longer the huge saber-toothed cat it normally was, but was now more like a cool and haughty house cat. It had fully occupied the empty space above the cupboard and was busy grooming its fur. The appearances of these two Summons were due to their Awakened Abilities: Loyal Dog and Borrowed Cat, respectively. The former turned Beast F into a small, affectionate dog, and the latter turned Beast E into a cat that just lounged around. The effect would last for one month.

At first glance, these two Awakened Abilities seemed quite pointless. However, that was not the case. Despite their new appearances, the two Summons retained their Strengthened stats, possessing more than five hundred HP and Attack. They made for perfectly camouflaged guards *and* perfect objects of affection for the servants.

Allen was still in the middle of going through all the Summons’ Awakened Skills. Their effects and durations were all so different that the more he discovered, the more he realized how much care and effort had been put into the Awakening skill.

“All right, ready to go?”

“Heck yeah! Let’s go!”

Ever since he figured out how to use his own skill, Dogora had been extremely enthusiastic about going to the dungeons—he was practically champing at the bit. Allen was just glad that his friend had learned the joy of seeing his own progress.

This day would be the first time the party was going to challenge the boss of a Rank B dungeon. As always, they entered the dungeon building and asked GDOS to send them down to the deepest floor. The next moment, they found themselves in front of giant, heavily ornamented double doors. When they opened those doors, the circular space beyond came into view.

“That’s a...what was it called again?” Allen racked his brains. “Ah, huge boar, right?”

“Yep,” Keel confirmed. “It’s very similar to great boars, but stronger.”

One huge boar loomed in the center of the chamber, standing five meters tall. Ten great boars, three meters tall each, formed a perimeter all around it. This was a truly befitting boss for a beast-filled dungeon.

Honestly, I don’t think this fight is gonna be a challenge to us.

[redacted]

```
Name: Krena
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[redacted]

Age: 12
Class: Sword Lord
Level: 37
HP: 1,520 + 900
MP: 586
Attack: 1,520 + 900
Endurance: 1,068 + 900
Agility: 1,027 + 900
Intelligence: 606
Luck: 735
Skills: Sword Lord {3}, Slash {3}, Flying Slash {3}, Toughness {1}, Sword Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Limit BreakName: Cecil Granvelle
Age: 12
Class: Wizardess
Level: 37
HP: 637
MP: 1,069 + 600
Attack: 406
Endurance: 664
Agility: 628 + 600
Intelligence: 1,470 + 600
Luck: 592
Skills: Wizardry {3}, Fire {3}, Earth {3}, Wisdom {1}, Sparring {2}
Extra Skill: Petit MeteorName: Keel
Age: 13
Class: Cleric
Level: 37
HP: 475
MP: 899 + 300
Attack: 358
Endurance: 505
Agility: 575
Intelligence: 793 + 300
Luck: 723
Skills: Cleric {3}, Healing {3}, Solidity {3}, Faith {1}, Sword Mastery {3}
Extra Skill: Drops of God

[redacted]

The other day, Keel had turned thirteen—his birthday was the earliest among the No-life Gamers. They had thrown a party in his honor at the base. Allen had been glad to see that Keel was starting to get used to this kind of thing as of late.

When the party started going through their first Rank B dungeon, they had found many more opportunities to use their skills, so everyone's class skills—except Dogora's—had reached Lvl. 3, unlocking Toughness for Krena, Wisdom for Cecil, and Faith for Keel.

- Toughness: +900 to 4 stats
- Wisdom: +600 to 3 stats
- Faith: +300 to 2 stats

And to think I believed only Summoners got buffs.

Allen had been under the mistaken impression that getting stat buffs was something unique to him since Summoner was an eight-star class. The truth, however, was that other classes also received skills that boosted their stats. The other Gamers truly were growing a hundred times faster than Allen.

Yep, it's just as I'd thought. Normal Mode isn't weak at all. If the Alliance is still struggling against the Demon Lord, it means the demons are the ones who are too powerful.

Both Zenof, the captain of the knights in House Granvelle's service, and Dagrah, the hit man that Viscount Carnel had hired, were incredibly powerful. In spite of this, the battlefield was claiming half the lives of fully leveled fighters as strong as them.

"All Protect."

Keel's voice when casting Solidity Lvl. 3 brought Allen back from his thoughts. This was a skill that raised the entire party's Defense by ten percent. This modifier applied on top of each person's own skills, such as Toughness and the card buffs from Summoning. This made it actually quite useful—when activated, Krena's Defense nearly reached 200.

"Okay, let's do this!" Krena cried.

"Hell yeah!" Dogora replied with equal vigor. "We'll hold the front line!"

The two of them promptly charged forward on their Bird Cs, flanked on both sides by Beast Cs—giant boar-like Summons—who were using their Ability, Charge, to run in tandem. This arrangement was to prevent any of the enemies from ignoring the front line to attack the members with lower Endurance in the rear. Now that they were fighting Rank C monsters, there was a noticeable uptick in the number of monsters clever enough to attempt this. When the party had been making their way through the dungeon, Allen would remain at the back to protect the rear, but for boss fights, his usual position was right behind the front line so that he could command his Summons from the center of the battlefield.

"Flame Lance!"

Cecil focused her magic and Allen his Summons on the weaker great boars, leaving the huge boar to Krena and Dogora. Flame Lance, an Area of Effect spell that Cecil had obtained at Fire Lvl. 2, fell like rain and roasted the Rank C monsters to cinders.

“OIIIIIINK!”

After several attacks, a Flying Slash from Krena split the huge boar’s head apart, finishing it off.

“Oh, heck yeah! We killed a Rank B monster!” Keel cheered. Determining that the battle was over, he healed everyone up. “All Heal!”

Having access to a spell that can heal the entire party at once really is a boon. I can’t be more thankful, Allen thought.

“Now we have one Rank B dungeon under our b— WHOA!” When he saw the silver treasure chest that the huge boar had dropped, Keel whooped and rushed forward. “Ha ha ha! It’s *silver!* It’s a silver chest!”

He opened the lid, revealing a knuckle duster made of hihiirokane, the metal that was the next tier up from mithril. This weapon with a flame-colored glow was a top-class item that would easily go for several hundred gold. Keel lifted it slowly, transfixed at the sight. At first, Allen had thought Keel’s obsession with money was due to his family’s circumstances, but after partying with him this long, he had realized that Keel just liked money, plain and simple.

“Just how obsessed with money is he?” Cecil sighed, thinking the same thing as Allen was. “Ha ha, what if we call him Saint of Fortune?” That was the very moment the tongue-in-cheek title of “Saint of Fortune” was coined in this world.

This was how Allen and his party cleared their very first Rank B dungeon.

Chapter 8: Returning Home

It was now early August. A whole month had passed since the No-life Gamers cleared their first Rank B dungeon. Krena had managed to pass her general education exam, so the group hosted another party to celebrate. She had been all smiles from start to end, saying that she wanted another party after the next exam in February.

The dungeon delving was going smoothly: the party already had another Rank B dungeon under its belt and was currently working on the last one needed to access Rank A dungeons. For a group that started off not knowing anything about what dungeons were like, their progress was more than fast enough to make anyone do a double take. Krena's personal growth was remarkable as well; it would not be long until she would be strong enough to handle a Rank B dungeon solo.

Allen had resumed posting his Rank D magic stone requests back in July. In a Rank B dungeon, clearing one floor netted around two hundred stones. There were always three Summon Squads out at any given time, gathering a total of six hundred magic stones each day. Unfortunately, there was no way to raise this number any higher, as there was a limit to how many monsters could spawn on a floor per day.

One way to circumvent this daily cap was to seek out the monster-summoning traps. Although the Squads would sometimes lose members when taking them on, each trap could yield up to a thousand Rank C magic stones. Naturally, finding those traps became a top priority every night. Once the clock struck midnight, both traps and treasure chests reset.

In one month, Allen had managed to earn 425 gold from chest drops and 34,760 Rank C magic stones with his Summons Squads alone. He traded the latter for 310,000 Rank D magic stones. Eventually, however, a stiffly smiling staff member at the Guild informed Allen that they were capping him at 10,000 stones per week, or 50,000 a month.

Everything that the party needed was funded through dungeon loot. This included a time-telling magic tool that was essentially a clock—for keeping track of time when sleeping overnight inside a dungeon—as well as a horse-drawn carriage to carry foodstuffs and other luggage on their shopping trips. Both had cost fifty gold apiece. The fifteen-year-old servant was in charge of caring for the horse, which was housed in the small stable on the premises.

At the moment, Allen was Sharing the vision of a Summon flying in the sky.

Ohhh! There it is. That was pretty far.

He recognized the rolling scenery below; slowly but surely, Krena Village came into view. He used to make this trip once a month using Bird G, but this time he was using Bird F, the pigeon Summon. It was holding a basket in its claws.

Summer break had arrived for Allen's party. They had agreed to spend the time going dungeon delving rather than returning home. This was all for the sake of getting even just one day closer to entering Rank A dungeons—and their promise of MP Recovery Rings.

However, although he would not be going back to Granvelle, Allen still had business that required him to send a Bird F to the viscount. So while he was at it, he figured he would take the time to catch up with his family first. To make this a "three birds with one stone" kind of thing, this trip was meant as flying practice for Bird F too.

It was lunchtime when Poppo arrived. All of Allen's family were gathered at the dinner table, digging into steamed potatoes. The bird entered the earthen-floored room and as it blinked, said in Allen's voice, "I'm baaaack! Phew, that was a long flight."

"Huh?" Myulla's potato slipped from her hands. "The birdie just spoke!"

Rodin and Theresia froze solid.

Good, looks like they can hear me just fine.

Just like Bird F, Bird G could also speak. However, it could only speak in Allen's voice and was not capable of imitating others.

Bird F's Ability: Transmission

- Can deliver words in Allen's voice to a radius of 3 km
- Can specify who hears the message; those not specified cannot hear
- The volume of the voice is uniform regardless of distance and obstacles

Bird F's Awakened Ability: Messenger

- Can deliver words in Allen's voice to a radius of 100 km
- Can deliver video footage of something that Allen had seen before
- The volume of the voice and quality of the playback is uniform regardless of distance and obstacles
- Cooldown: 1 day

The high utility of both Abilities made it clear they were designed for use on the battlefield. Similarly, Allen had learned a lot more about the Awakening skill once it reached Lvl. 5. The following were his notes on the Awakened Abilities of the other Bird-type Summons up to Rank D.

Bird G's Awakened Ability: Warble

- Can simultaneously play multiple lines learned through the base Ability, Voice Mimic
- Cooldown: 1 day

Bird E’s Awakened Ability: Farsight

- Can see clearly within a radius of 100 km
- Cannot see through obstacles
- Effective only during the day
- Cooldown: 1 day

Bird D’s Awakened Ability: White Night

- Can see clearly within a radius of 100 km
- Cannot see through obstacles
- Effective only during the night
- Cooldown: 1 day

“I-Is that you, Allen?” Rodin asked with apprehension.

“Mm-hm! I’m home! There’s lots of stuff today, so I came with this bird instead of Pippi.” *Though Bird G’s real name is* Chappy*, not Pippi.*

The pigeon carefully lowered its basket to the floor. It contained, among other things, Keel’s, Dogora’s, and Cecil’s letters to their respective families. As Krena’s father could not read, Allen planned on reading the letter aloud for him through Bird F.

Then Allen proceeded to catch up with his family. He told them that this Summon, just like Pippi, was a part of his power. He also told them that he was doing great at the Academy, and that he was having fun living with everyone. Then he also shared details about Summoning.

“Ah, so that’s what it was,” Rodin nodded, not looking all that surprised. “Well, I’d thought it was something along those lines. The way that bird acted with Mash and Myulla had you all over it.”

Oh, he’d figured it out? As expected of my father.

When Allen was finished, it was his family’s turn to share their news. Myulla had undertaken the Appraisal Ceremony the past April, which had sadly confirmed she was Talentless.

Wow, she’s already six years old. Time really flies.

“Also, uh, a messenger came from the feudal lord saying they’re appointing me as a village chief.”

“Ohhh! You’re becoming a village chief!” Took them a while. There was talk of it back when I was eight. It’s been more than four and a half years since.

“Seems like it. Even I’m at a bit of a loss.”

In order to produce more food and resources to support the war effort against the Demon Lord Army, the king of Ratash had issued the Land Reclamation Decree, which obligated the lords of fiefdoms to establish new frontier villages. Back when Allen was eight years old, the head butler at the Granvelle mansion where he had served had told him that Rodin was being considered for founding and leading a new village.

When the matter of the mithril mines in the White Dragon Mountains suddenly kicked up, talk of the new villages was relegated to the back burner. However, now that mining operations were largely underway, the frontier village project had resumed. Rodin was expected to strike off and establish a new village next April, after the snow thawed. The location was two days’ walk from Krena Village. Krena’s family would be joining Rodin’s.

Well, with father being thirty-two and mother turning thirty this year, this is actually a pretty good time for it.

Establishing a new village was a ten- to fifteen-year commitment at least. If the village chief was too young, they would have trouble getting the villagers to listen; too old, and they might become unable to meet the physical demands of the position. In light of this, Rodin’s current age was just right.

I should think about how I can help once the village construction starts in earnest.

Allen still had another place to go after this, so he stayed to chat for only a little while longer. All right, next is Granvelle City. I should thank the viscount for making my father village chief on top of everything else.

“Okay, make sure you get those letters delivered!”

The pigeon that Allen was Sharing with turned around and flew out the door, heading for the fiefdom of Granvelle’s capital city.

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Before long, Poppo reached Granvelle City and landed in the garden of the mansion, the very place where, until five months ago, Allen had been working as a live-in manservant.

Tap, tap.

The bird used its beak to tap at a window. Inside, Viscount Granvelle noticed the pigeon with a basket. When he quizzically opened the window, the bird smoothly glided into the room and settled onto his desk.

“It has been a while, my lord. It’s me, Allen.”

“What?! Allen?!” The man jerked backward in surprise, but quickly regained his calm. He recalled the captain of his knights mentioning a parrot that spoke in Allen’s voice in a report before.

Through the bird, Allen informed Viscount Granvelle that there was a letter from Cecil in the basket and that she would be forgoing coming home this summer to focus on dungeon delving. The viscount’s brows twitched when the term “dungeon delving” came up, but he did not otherwise protest her decision. All noble families knew about the Academy students’ summer break assignment to go through dungeons as a way to push them to overcome Trials of the Gods.

“Thank you for going to the trouble of reporting back.” Even though Allen was speaking through a pigeon, the viscount still made sure to express his gratitude.

“And, my lord...I’m sure Lady Cecil will mention this in her own letter, but we’ve met someone from House Carnel.”

“What? House Carnel?!” Viscount Granvelle’s face turned into a blatant scowl.

Allen proceeded to explain how he had met Keel and accepted him as a companion, ending with, “And that is why he is now living with us.”

“Th-That means Cecil is also living with him, right?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The man turned to look out the window and sighed before massaging the bridge of his nose.

Oh? Is the summer heat getting to him?

“My lord, Keel said that the royal envoy told him he would be given the opportunity to restore his family if he served five years of duty. If this is true, I was hoping you’d know something about it. Have you heard anything relevant, sir?”

This question was the main reason why Allen had sent a Bird F all this way. He was banking on the fact that, as lord of a neighboring fiefdom—and also as the person who had spearheaded the House Granvelle Affair—any mentions of House Carnel’s restoration would have reached Viscount Granvelle’s ears.

“I...have not heard of any such arrangements.”

That’s strange. Now, what are the chances that Keel is the only one informed?

“However, if Keel’s Talent is Cleric, then I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Does this happen often?”

“I’m only speaking generally, but...Aristocrats in this country do have a track record of working Clerics to death.” The viscount went on to elaborate.

Both royal and noble families naturally wanted the best for their children. Though some were keen to send their children to the battlefield—for the honor and whatnot—it made sense that they wanted to ensure that their children came back alive.

However, on top of being quite rare, most with a healing Talent were quickly taken into the Church. Thus there was a constant scramble for any who had somehow slipped through the Church’s fingers.

“Are they really that rare?” Is it because there aren’t any healers that half of those who go to the battlefield don’t come back?

“Yes, they are. Because higher-ranked nobility receive priority, very few healers end up assigned to lesser nobles. Though of course, that’s where the elves come in; Rohzenheim sends healers as part of their agreement with the Five Continent Alliance.”

So, Baukis sends magic tools and Rohzenheim sends magic. The Central Continent is just on the receiving end for everything. Well, I guess if the Central Continent falls, the other two to the north would end up fighting a war on multiple fronts.

In other words, although it was true there was still a shortage of healers, measures had been taken to address the issue. However, the elves were

there to help the war effort, not to listen to the whims and fancies of stuck-up children born with silver spoons in their mouths. A single elf was capable of maintaining several hundred soldiers. As such, there was no way they would be assigned to serve any single noble. If the Central Continent forces alienated the elves, they could very well just pack up and return to Rohzenheim. That would spell the complete collapse of the front line.

So, what were the aforementioned royal and noble families to do?

At first, they had paid off the families of commoners and serfs born with healing Talents with massive sums of money—in the eyes of the lowborn, at least—or by raising their social status, or sometimes both. Then, with the families' consent, the aristocrats hired those healers as exclusive retainers. However, the Elmea Church vehemently protested what they called "exploitation of those with gods-given abilities for personal gain."

"And the power of the Church is equal to that of the king?"

"Depending on the country, the Church and various Guilds, like the Adventurer's Guild, possess varying degrees of influence. In Giamut, it's close to zero; the emperor holds near absolute power. Here in Ratash, however, the Church has quite a bit of authority."

The solution that the aristocratic families—at least, the royal and upper noble families—then reached was to recruit from the lower nobility. Since this could be framed as a matter between nobles, it was much harder for the Church to protest.

Most families of the young nobles on the battlefield—and there were a lot of them—would do whatever they could to secure a dedicated healer for their children. And even after those sons and daughters completed their duties and returned home, those families would naturally want to continue employing those healers. In some cases, they promised the healers rewards and support to make their families successful in exchange for their service; in others, they convinced the healers' families to basically sell them off for the same. It was not uncommon to hear of healers being forced to stay and work on the battlefield until they literally dropped dead.

"And you suspect that is what's happening to Keel, my lord?"

"Chances are high."

So, there's at least one royal envoy who's facilitating this racket, plus a mastermind who's giving them orders.

Within the past month, Keel's Cleric skill had gone up again, reaching Lvl. 4. Healing Magic was dependent on the Intelligence stat. Although Allen was still in the middle of determining the exact formula linking the two, he did not need further convincing that Healing Magic was incredibly useful—if cast among soldiers standing in a standard formation, Healing Magic Lvl. 4 was capable of healing more than a hundred all at once.

Then again, I have my Awakening skill too. What it does is no less ridiculous.

After converting all one hundred thousand Rank D magic stones that he had gathered in July into Skill XP and raising Awakening to Lvl. 6, Allen now had a much clearer picture of the skill.

Grass F's Awakened Ability: Herb

- The MP gauge of whoever breathes in the fragrance this gives off refills in 3-hour intervals
- Effect lasts for 24 hours

Grass E's Awakened Ability: Frond of Life

- Restores 1,000 HP for all party members within a 50-meter radius

Grass D's Awakened Ability: Seed of Magic

- Restores 1,000 MP for all party members within a 50-meter radius

Grass C's Awakened Ability: Potherb

- Removes all debuffs from all party members within a 50-meter radius
- Effect lasts for 24 hours

In a standard formation, over 2,500 soldiers could stand within a circle with a fifty-meter radius. Presumably, all of them could be healed all at the same time.

After his talk with Viscount Granvelle, Allen decided to add Rank E magic stones to his monthly requests for Rank D stones at the Guild. He figured that he could never have too many recovery items on the battlefield—all the more so if he would be fighting alongside his former classmates. After all, he had no idea how many years it would take him to wipe out the Demon Lord Army and kill the Demon Lord himself.

Though I am getting a little ahead of myself. Let's get back to the conversation at hand.

"So if I'm getting this right, the main gist is that, since Keel's been completely stripped of his nobility, he's no longer obligated to go to the battlefield. And whoever's in charge realized that would mean losing a valuable healer, so they decided to coerce him into fighting for five years?"

Despite looking like a pigeon, the anger in Allen's voice was palpable.

"In so many words, yes. Whoever's behind this probably has a child of their own who will be attending the Academy later on. The reason why Keel was told five years is most likely so he could be roped into accompanying that child when the time comes for them to serve out their duty."

“I see. I understand the situation now. Thank you for the information, my lord.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

“Oh, please don’t worry, my lord. I won’t cause trouble for House Granvelle.”

“Don’t do that. Be straight with me—what do you plan on doing?”

“I’ll ask His Majesty to restore House Carnel myself.”

“And what if he says no?”

“I’ll just have to make my request *after* I’ve achieved so much on the battlefield that he can’t say no.”

If he really turns me down, that’d spell the end of this kingdom; I’ll become the Demon Lord in the south! Ha ha...that’s a joke, obviously. But still, I’ve got to think things out and do it in such a way that he’d really have no choice but to say yes.

The several months Allen had spent with Keel had convinced him that the boy had a good heart. Although Keel was so obsessed with money that Cecil had christened him the “Saint of Fortune,” the fact that they could call him that to his face was proof of how well he now fit in with the party. What money he earned, he only ever spent on his family or saved up. He never splurged and instead lived as frugally as he could. He never said so himself, but he was most likely saving up so that his family could have funds to survive off of should he ever lose his life on the battlefield. Of course, Allen had no intention of leaving Keel’s circumstances the way they were.

The viscount rubbed his temples, falling deep into thought. After a moment of silent contemplation, he said, “Allen, allow me to confirm one more time: the envoy told Keel five years, yes? Not three, and not seven?”

“Yes, my lord. That’s what Keel said.”

“I see, five years...” the viscount murmured. “Apologies, Allen, but could you entrust this matter to me?”

“As in...you’ll take care of it, my lord?” Damn, I’d only called in hoping to get some info. Never thought the viscount would take action on our behalf.

“Indeed. The envoy did bring up my name, after all.”

“Thank you very much, my lord.”

The viscount said that the first thing he’d do was go to the royal court and take stock of the situation. He told Allen that this would take some time and to be patient. Through the pigeon, Allen conveyed his acknowledgment and gratitude.

After that, Allen informed his friends that he had left this matter in the viscount’s hands. Keel only responded, “Got it.” The boy had started entertaining his own doubts about the royal envoy who had visited him. Furthermore, he declared that he wished to continue going to the dungeons with the rest of the party, just as before. Regardless of what was to happen, the fact still remained that his family needed money.

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In the blink of an eye, it became mid-August. School was on break, so the No-life Gamers were going dungeon delving four out of six days each week. Thanks to all their extra time, they had finally cleared three Rank B dungeons. Today, instead of going to the dungeons, they were headed to the Adventurer's Guild. Aside from picking up magic stones and registering another quest, there were a few things they needed to do there.

"Welcome. How may we help you today?" A staff member greeted them.

"We're here for the magic stones requests and to update our adventurer cards. There are also some things we want to ask about."

The guild staff directed them to wait their turn up on the second floor.

As expected, the place is packed with students. I guess everyone's going dungeon crawling in the summer. It's not all first-years here, though; I see quite a few from the upper grades too.

The number of students here made it easy to understand why the Guild dedicated a whole floor to serving them. Many of the students were third-years, most likely because Demon Lord history was taught in the semester after summer break in the second year. In about half a year's time, the third-years would be heading to the battlefield. This was precious training time to get as strong as they possibly could before then.

Time passed by quickly as Allen was engrossed with his thoughts. Eventually, his party was called over to a counter. Because the No-Life Gamers came to this Guild office almost every week, they had all gotten very familiar with each other.

Like a waitress confirming a regular customer's usual order, the woman at the counter asked, "Are you here to pick up your magic stone requests again?"

"That too," Allen replied, "but we finished clearing our third Rank B dungeon the other day, so we also want to update our adventurer cards."

The clerk looked a bit surprised, but then went on to ask for their cards and brought them to the back. When she returned, she said, "The process will take some time. Meanwhile, would you like me to process the magic stone requests?"

Allen nodded. "Yes, please. Also, on top of my usual Rank D magic stone request, I want to add a new one for Rank E stones too. Is there a limit to how many I can request?"

"Um, I'm sorry, please let me check."

In preparation for joining the war in three years, Allen wanted to stock up on a large variety of magic stones. Soon, the Guild clerk confirmed that the greatest number of Rank E stones Allen could request a month was a hundred thousand stones, or twenty thousand a week. Allen asked the staff member to register the request on top of what he already had, making it a total of thirty thousand magic stones that he would be gathering each month.

When the guild clerk had handed over the magic stones from the previous quest and registered the new quests, talk turned to the Rank A

dungeons. She warned them to be careful, explaining that very few adventurers made Rank A dungeons the focus of their activities. One big reason why adventurers raided dungeons was for the loot the boss monsters dropped. However, the bosses of Rank A dungeons were Rank A monsters, and the large majority of adventurers in this city knew fighting one was beyond their abilities. Due to this, Rank A dungeons held very little appeal—and far too much danger—for most.

When she was finished with her warning, Allen nodded thoughtfully. “Thank you for telling us all that. May I ask about something else?”

“Of course. What do you want to know?”

“Please tell us about the Auction.”

The gear that Allen and his companions were using had not changed much from what they had prepared before their first Rank C dungeon. Back then, Allen had put up two hundred gold to gear everyone out in weapons and equipment in the mithril price range. They had not come across anything better in the dungeons since then, so there had been nothing to exchange it with.

Equipment was as important as levels when it came to the pursuit of power. Local merchants were good and all, but it was about time for the party to consider items beyond what was commercially available. The Auction was where the truly rare and powerful equipment was traded.

Currently, everyone in Allen’s party was earning several gold every day, and this amount was expected to go up even more once they began tackling Rank A dungeons. The idea was to use those funds to get the very best equipment that money could buy. This naturally included MP Recovery Rings, but that was not all. The No-life Gamers wanted the most powerful weapons, the sturdiest armor, and all of the convenient magic tools. This was why they were now turning their eyes toward the Auction.

The guild staff nodded in understanding. “The Auction arranged by the Adventurer’s Guild, is it? Very well.”

Info on the Auction

- Held once every month
- The cutoff date for submitting items to be auctioned was the 20th of the previous month
- The Guild keeps 5% of the winning bid as service charge
- Agents hired to bid on someone’s behalf are owed 5% of the winning bid

I see. And if we pick up any good drops, we’d earn a lot more selling them through the Auction than to a merchant.

Allen continued taking notes in his grimoire as he asked, “How often do orichalcum items show up?”

“O-Orichalcum, was it? We’ve yet to see one. The most powerful weapon that’s been sold through the Auction was made of adamantite, and the

winning bid was over one thousand gold. We don't exactly see adamantite items all that often either."

General Estimate of the Price of Swords

- Mithril: 30 gold
- Hihiirokane: 100 gold
- Adamantite: Over 1,000 gold
- Orichalcum: Undetermined

As Krena and Dogora's weapons—greatsword and war ax, respectively—were much larger than swords, they were expected to be worth even more.

In his past life, Allen had sought all the best weapons and top-of-the-line armor. In many instances, obtaining them was not simply a matter of paying with money. Some could only be traded under specific circumstances, while others had stat or level requirements. Some items could only be obtained through quests. The reason why Allen was not all that fixated on money was because he expected that what he could buy with money would eventually become useless to him.

"Could you tell me what kind of items are usually sold at the Auction? Just a general idea."

"Of course."

Items Commonly in the Auction Catalog

- HP Ring
- Attack Ring
- Intelligence Ring
- Anti-Poison Ring
- Anti-Sleep Ring

In other words, there were, aside from weapons and armor, accessories that boosted stats and provided immunity to specific debuffs. Prices could range from dozens to thousands of gold coins, with the resistance rings generally costing around a hundred gold.

I have no idea just how much of a buff these items give, but those are some pretty hefty prices. I suppose the demand mainly comes from higher nobles with cash to burn to support their kids heading to the battlefield. The only reason why the price doesn't keep rising is probably because the market also has medicine and potions that can cure and prevent debuffs.

The staff also mentioned equipment enchanted with resistance against magical and breath attacks appearing in the Auction. Items made with dragon materials were considered to be of the highest quality and went for over a thousand gold apiece. Although Allen would not be participating in the Auction just yet, just thinking of the possibilities it contained quickened his heartbeat.

"Thank you for everything."

“I’m glad to be of service. Here are your new adventurer cards.”

“Yay, new cards!” Krena cheered as she accepted hers. All the talk about the Auction had apparently gone completely over her head.

“All right, let’s head to the reference room and figure out what we need to prepare.” Dogora proved equally as excited as Krena.

Heck yeah! We can finally challenge Rank A dungeons!

The No-life Gamers were going to step foot into a Rank A dungeon for the first time the following day.

Chapter 9: Rank A Dungeon

September arrived, signaling that half of summer break had passed. Allen and his companions had begun progressing through their very first Rank A dungeon.

They had three main goals for their dungeon raids: to level up, to obtain more powerful items, and to find an MP Recovery Ring. Despite how smoothly they had gone through Rank C and B dungeons, however, they were finding the Rank A dungeon significantly more time-consuming. The original plan had been to check out the Auction starting in September, but now they were focused on clearing their current dungeon.

Info on Rank A Dungeons

- Filled with Rank C, B, and A monsters
- There are 4 of them in Academy City
- Contain 15 to 20 floors
- Takes at least 24 hours to go through each floor

One of the biggest issues for Allen's group was the last point—the time needed to traverse the dungeon. Each floor was unbelievably expansive. The estimated travel time of twenty-four hours was based on the average human walking speed of five kilometers per hour, meaning a distance of 120 kilometers. As if the distance alone was not enough, the paths themselves were complicated and labyrinthian.

Even though Allen was sending Bird Es to scout ahead, the passages branched off often, and even the wrong ways and dead ends continued for a significant distance. If, once they had gained a general idea of the starting area, they had not simply picked a direction and started walking, Allen's party probably would have been overwhelmed by the number of options and not have been able to take the first step. In spite of Allen's efforts, however, they still found themselves on the wrong path and had to retrace their steps every so often. All together, the pathways on one floor of the dungeon came to more than a thousand kilometers in total.

To make matters worse, there were several new kinds of traps. One of them was the Teleport Trap. When someone stepped on it, everyone within the magic circle the trap generated would be sent to a random location. Of course, it was entirely possible for someone to suddenly find themselves teleported into a group of monsters; that was not the worst thing about this trap, though. The real issue lay in trying to regroup with party members who were all scattered throughout the giant maze. The No-life Gamers did not have access to a virtual map in their minds that they could rely on while making their way through the dungeon. Allen was indeed drawing a map in his grimoire as they went along, but if their group ended up scattered, they would have to find their way back to each other the same way any other

adventurer had to. This was why they had been at this same dungeon for several weeks now.

“Good morning,” Allen said aloud.

“Mm, morning,” Dogora replied, sitting up from where he had been sleeping next to Allen.

The two had been sleeping side by side not because they had moved into the same bedroom at the base, but because they were camping out on the twelfth floor of the dungeon. After the party realized that they could not clear a whole floor in one day, they had started to camp out overnight in small chambers in the dungeon. This being the twelfth floor meant they were already more than halfway through. The goal was to gain at least one Rank A dungeon under their belt before summer break was over.

Naturally, Krena, Cecil, and Keel were also present. Although they referred to this place as a small room, it was actually the size of a swimming pool. As such, there was plenty of space. Allen’s Storage held plenty of firewood, foodstuffs, and everything else they needed to sleep outside. The group had no need of anything that was too large to fit through the Storage opening, such as bulky tents. Because they usually only camped out one night at a time—two at most—they could make do with just the bare minimum luggage.

“Did any monsters attack while we were asleep?”

“Only a few, Master. They were dying to be killed.”

This room was a dead end, but the monsters were constantly on the move, ready to pounce on any adventurer they found. This deep into the dungeon, monsters were mainly Rank B and possessed the intelligence to attack together in groups. Allen recalled the agent at the Real Estate Guild mentioning adventurers forming large parties of twenty, even up to fifty members—that latter number most likely taking into account rotating guard shifts during the night as well.

Although Allen’s party only had five people, five Spirits Cs always remained on lookout whenever they slept. As Summons did not need to sleep or eat, they did not need to take shifts. Allen still wanted to get his beauty sleep at night, so thanks to the Summons, the entire party could sleep without a care.

“Pretty quiet night, then.”

“Quiet as the dead, Master. None of the Wallys blew up.”

Hmm, so when our defense is perfect, we don’t get attacked. I feel like there’s a bit of ebb and flow to the frequency of monster encounters.

Maria’s words caused one of the Stone Es to swell up with pride. By now, Allen had largely finished analyzing the new Stone C Summon, as well as the Awakened Abilities of the other Stone-type Summons.

Stone E’s Awakened Ability: Explode

- Causes the Summon to explode when a specified target comes within 5 m

- The explosion’s shock wave expands out for 10 m
- The Summon dies upon activation and its card disappears
- Multiple copies can be Summoned at the same time
- Can explode on Allen’s command
- Cannot move while this Ability is active
- Disappears automatically 24 hours after activation

Stone D’s Awakened Ability: Protect

- Endurance stat is multiplied by 5
- Can be disabled on Allen’s command
- Effective for 1 hour
- Cooldown: 1 day

Stone C’s Ability: Substitute

- Can take damage on behalf of one target within a 50 m radius
- Can move while this Ability is active

Stone C’s Awakened Ability: Sacrifice

- Can take damage on behalf of all party members within a 50 m radius
- Can move while this Awakened Ability is active
- Effective for 1 hour
- Cooldown: 1 day

Stone E’s Awakened Ability, Explode, contained enough destructive power to kill even Rank B monsters, making it dangerous to the party if it were to go off too close by. Therefore, Allen had left a few of them in the passageway outside the room the party had chosen to spend the night in. Their main purpose was to kill all approaching monsters, but the ensuing explosions also served as especially effective alarm clocks.

Stone D’s Awakened Ability, Protect, made it great as a decoy. Although its Attack stat was nothing to write home about, its overwhelming Endurance made it very hard to kill. It could help serve as an additional target to tank a group of monsters’ attacks.

Stone C could be tasked with protecting the party members with lower Endurance, such as Cecil and Keel, during battle. Now that they were facing Rank B monsters, the party was contending with attacks that dealt much higher damage.

Soon, everyone else had woken up and begun bustling around, packing up their belongings. Allen Summoned eight Frans—five for riding, three to scout ahead and set off any traps in their way. There was no way to

perfectly circumvent all the traps, but this strategy at least proved useful against Teleport Traps.

“Two orc kings and one cyclops ahead!” Allen warned.

“Dogora, don’t let any of them through this time!” Cecil shouted, receiving a brusque “I know!” in reply.

The three Bird C scouts made first contact with the approaching monsters as Krena and Dogora charged forward, weapons tightly gripped in their hands. With how long they had spent in this Rank A dungeon, their levels had gone up quite significantly. Not even Rank B monsters scared them anymore. Their respective Attack Skills—Flying Slash and Full Might—had reached Lvl. 4, growing increasingly powerful with each level up. The two damage dealers now started spamming those skills, steadily whittling down the HP of the monsters ahead.

The orc king that Krena was fighting was the first to fall, soon followed by the other that served as Dogora’s opponent. Because Krena’s Attack was the higher of the two, Cecil directed her magic attacks at Dogora’s target, prioritizing reducing the number of enemies. They had gotten their cooperation down to a science.

“All right! Only the cyclops is left!”

Allen rallied everyone as they surrounded the monster that towered even higher than orc kings. Many Rank B monsters easily reached seven meters in height, making for very large targets. They then began raining attacks on it. Even Maria joined in the onslaught, firing off Psychokinesis over and over, gouging out sizable chunks of the cyclops’s health in the process. It was not long before it was on the verge of dying.

“ROOOAARRR!”

The giant monster’s club whistled with the speed of its swing. Dogora managed to block the attack using his ax, but was thrown off his mount in the process.

“You okay, Dogora?!” Cecil called out anxiously, seeing as he had been sent flying all the way back to where she was standing in the rear. Keel started making his way over to cast Healing Magic on him while Allen checked Dogora’s Status through his grimoire.

“Don’t worry. I’m fine.” Dogora immediately grabbed his ax and ran back to the front line. Just as he took his first step, however, a click sounded. “Huh? What’s this?” Before anyone could react, a magic circle expanded from underneath his foot. The next moment, both he and Cecil disappeared.

The two of them had been teleported. They were now somewhere out there in this expansive maze, without a healer, where Rank B monsters wandered freely.



"Dogora! Cecil!" Crap! Of all people, it had to be those two!

Leaving Krena to finish off the cyclops, Allen immediately Unsummoned all the Summons he had out remotely gathering XP and magic stones, then sent his grimoire into overdrive replacing the holder slots with Spirit Cs.

Our top priority is finding those two and delivering them recovery items.

As soon as each new Spirit C was made, she would fly out, passing through walls, holding several Fronds of Life and Seeds of Magic. Although normal recovery items could not pass through walls, the ones made from Grass-type Summons were able to.

Krena, who had already killed the cyclops, ran over with Keel. They both wore distraught expressions.

"What should we do, Allen? Should we go look too?" Keel asked.

Allen shook his head. "No, there's no point in us all getting lost. Let's wait for Maria to find them first."

Thankfully, I gave them some recovery items to hold on to earlier. And they just got buffed too.

As a precaution, Allen had given every party member ten Fronds of Life and Seeds of Magic each, which fully restored HP and MP, respectively. There were no guarantees in adventuring; these were meant as insurance in case Allen left them for any reason and they had to make their way back out of a dungeon on their own. Furthermore, right before they engaged the cyclops in combat just now, he had buffed everyone four times using the Abilities and Awakened Abilities of all of his Fish-type Summons.

Fish D's Awakened Ability: Disperse

- Gives a 10% chance of Evading physical and magical attacks
- Effective for 1 hour
- Cooldown: 1 day

Fish C's Ability: Shark Oil

- Increases critical hit rate
- Effective for 24 hours

Fish C's Awakened Ability: Shark Skin

- Gives a 10% chance of dealing a Critical Hit
- Effective for 1 hour
- Cooldown: 1 day

There was a certain probability that attacks could be "Evaded"—basically, nullified—in this world, with that exact number depending on a variety of factors, including the Agility and relevant skill levels of both

attacker and evader. Magic was harder to Evade than physical attacks, likely working off of a different calculation.

Fish D's Ability, Spray, gave a noticeable boost to the chance of Evading both physical and magical attacks regardless of the attacking monster's stats. The Summon's Awakened Ability, Disperse, brought this up to a hard ten percent chance. No matter how fast or how powerful a monster was, one in ten of its attacks—both physical and magical—would be completely nullified. Even considering that this buff lasted only an hour, this was an incredible boost.

In addition to Evasion, this world also had the concept of Critical Hits, which were attacks that dealt twice the normal damage. The rate for this also depended on both sides' Agility and skill levels, but it was possible to further increase the chance of triggering this phenomenon by attacking an opponent's weak spots. Allen recalled being on the receiving end of many such attacks when Dagrah was trying to kill him. Fish C's Awakened Ability, Shark Skin, guaranteed a ten percent chance of landing these Critical Hits.

Thirty harrowing minutes passed after the Spirit Cs had flown off in all directions.

"RAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!"

"Flame Lance!"

I found them! That way!

Allen finally spotted, through his Shared vision with one of the Spirit Cs, a blood-soaked Dogora standing protectively in front of Cecil at the entrance of a dead-end room. They were engaged in combat with three Rank B monsters—two king basilisks and one ogre. Judging by the situation, they had fled to this room and were now trapped.

The blood running down Dogora's face indicated that they had used up all of their health recovery items within the past thirty minutes. While he exchanged furious blows with the seven-meter-tall ogre, blinded in one eye from the blood, Cecil desperately provided cover fire from behind.

The situation's critical. Maria, use Poltergeist!

"Time to kill them all! Poltergeist!"

When Spirit C activated her Awakened Ability, dozens of gray, volleyball-sized orbs appeared in midair and shot straight at the monsters. This was an Area of Effect attack that cost a hundred MP and had a cooldown of one day, with each projectile packing as much destructive damage as a single Psychokinesis.

In no time at all, the three monsters were dead. Dogora and Cecil used the recovery items Maria had brought to heal themselves back up.

"Are you okay?" Allen asked through Maria.

As he tried to get his breath back, Dogora panted, "That...was a bit close...for comfort. Thanks...for coming...in time."

The No-life Gamers normally had a pretty large safety margin when going through the dungeons, but that was possible only because they stuck

together and had the help of the Summons. Things were much harder when it was just Dogora and Cecil alone.

"We're coming to rejoin you soon. Stay here and don't m—"

Heavy huffing interrupted Maria's words, immediately followed by two huge boars coming into view.

Cecil gripped her wand. "In the meantime, we'll continue fighting."

Oh, crap! Marias, all of you, go help them!

While ordering all twenty Spirit Cs that had been scattered in various directions to change course, Allen told his companions, "Dogora and Cecil are both fine."

"Really?!" Krena sighed with relief.

"Yep. I know where they are now, so let's head over!"

"Okay!"

"Krena, Keel, we're using Idaten, so hold on to your Fran tightly!"

With a higher-pitched "*Kweee!*" than normal, the Bird Cs mustered more strength than they ever had in their thighs, then blasted forward. Krena's yelp of surprise overlapped with Keel's scream.

"This is too faaast!"

Idaten was Bird C's Awakened Ability. It enabled the Summon to run at three hundred kilometers per hour for one hour and had a cooldown of one day. The birds ran with their heads extended and parallel to the ground, not slowing down in the slightest even when going around sharp corners. Everyone grabbed on to the feathers of their mounts tightly to not get thrown off by the inertia of those turns.

Keel screamed, "We're gonna die!"

"It's fine. Just hang on!" Allen shouted back while guiding the Bird Cs. As before, three other Bird Cs went ahead of them to trigger all the traps. They encountered monsters along the way, but there was no time to deal with them. A few monsters reacted in time to take some swings at them, but by then the group was already out of sight, having ducked or dodged as needed.

Please let us get there in time!

Even though Allen knew where Dogora and Cecil were located, he and his companions could not phase through walls. They ended up taking a few wrong turns and had to detour, but the speed of Idaten proved more than enough to make up for any lost time.

There they are! Phew.

"RAAAAAHHHH!"

Slightly under an hour after they had set off, Allen's group finally reached the room where Dogora and Cecil were holding out. They arrived just as the boy dealt the killing blow to another ogre. Twenty Spirit Cs floated in the air surrounding them, all holding Fronds of Life and Seeds of Magic.

"What a relief," Allen said breathlessly while dismounting. "Are you two okay? I'm sorry I missed that one trap."

Dogora waved a hand dismissively. “Nah, I’m the one who stepped on it.”

Allen was apologizing, but Dogora thought *he* was the one in the wrong. After some back-and-forth trying to take the blame, they agreed to just let bygones be bygones, and everyone celebrated their reunion.

“Still, things got pretty dicey this time. Should we recruit a Scout who can detect traps?” Allen asked, verbalizing what he had been thinking on the way over. If there had been a Scout with them, chances were high that this incident might have been avoided entirely.

“I mean, we’ve made it this far without one,” Keel replied, not sounding very enthusiastic about the idea.

That’s true. And if we invite another student, we’d have to start all over from the Rank C dungeons again.

“I think it’s more an issue of Keel and me standing too far in the back during battle,” Cecil said. “Going forward, let’s position ourselves right behind Allen.”

After the group discussed several more ways to take precautions against traps, they agreed to put the idea of adding a Scout to their party on hold.

“Well then, shall we get back to it?”

Krena huffed with gusto. “Let’s find the next floor today!”

With that, the No-life Gamers resumed going through the Rank A dungeon.

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It was now nearing the end of September, and summer break was coming to a close. After the incident where Cecil and Dogora had gotten separated from the party, they never got cut off from each other by a Teleport Trap again. Everyone stayed close enough together to all be within range of any that might trigger, while Allen continued sending his Summons ahead to set off as many as possible beforehand.

During their discussion that ended with the conclusion to not add a Scout to the party, the topic of what roles they *would* want to recruit came up. Allen fervently made a case for some form of buff support. Although both Allen and Keel had ways of casting buffs, this was by no means their specialty. Allen argued that the abilities of a support Talent could greatly bolster the strength of the entire party. That said, this group also lacked a dedicated tank, someone who could withstand enemy attacks while the others dealt damage. In the end, the No-life Gamers shared the understanding that their party still had a lot of room for growth.

Info from Viscount Granvelle revealed that it was common for former classmates at the Academy to be posted together on the battlefield. The situation at the front lines often changed drastically at the drop of a hat, but more often than not, those who had been in the same class and in the same year would end up being dispatched to the same fortress.

There were currently only three border fortresses under Ratash’s jurisdiction. The large majority of fortresses were manned by Giamut, with

the remainder being protected by the other countries on the Central Continent. Generally, each fortress was run by one specific country so as to keep the chain of command simple and clear. After all, there was little point in, say, assigning a Ratashian soldier to be under a Giamutan general's command where he would feel like a stranger and lose morale. Having forces from different countries work together in cooperation was good enough; there was no need to mix the forces themselves. Past attempts at this forced integration had resulted in several fortresses falling.

The Bird F that Allen had used to consult Viscount Granvelle about Keel had remained at the mansion for communication purposes. Although Allen had not had a proper sit-down with him since, the fact that the viscount later made several trips to the royal capital indicated that he was indeed working on Keel's situation. He had asked Allen to entrust him with the matter, so Allen decided to stay put until told otherwise.

Today was a special day for the No-life Gamers, because it was going to be their very first battle against a Rank A dungeon final boss. They ate breakfast at their base, chatting with the servants who by now had gotten thoroughly used to living there, before heading over to the dungeon. Winning the day's battle was going to bring them one step closer to an MP Recovery Ring, which Allen was convinced was in the potential loot pool for Rank A dungeon bosses.

The party entered the dungeon building and teleported to the deepest floor. They opened the giant double doors and stepped through. Waiting for them in the middle of the boss room stood a huge suit of armor around ten meters high, surrounded by ten orc kings.

Oh, yay, an armor-type monster! A beast-type would have been even better, but this was definitely my second choice.

There were several kinds of bosses that could show up in the deepest floors of Rank A dungeons. The Adventurer's Guild had sorted them into several major classifications.

Types of Rank A Dungeon Bosses

- Dragon: The most powerful. Most difficult to fight. Spits AoE breath attacks.
- Ghost: Uses high-level magical attacks. Might be impervious to physical attacks.
- Armor: Very resistant to physical attacks. Incredibly high HP.
- Beast: Almost no resistances. Incredibly high Attack.
- Insect: Uses debuffs.

The boss that spawned was randomized each time. Allen would have preferred getting a beast-type as it was the easiest to fight, but the type that specialized only in Defense did not sound all that bad either.

"Hold on, guys. Gimme a minute while I swap out my cards."

Insect-type Summons wouldn’t be able to do much against this boss, so... Yep, this looks about good enough. And the Poppo at the Granvelle mansion is about to run out of time, so I might as well Unsummon it too.

Allen was switching out the cards in his grimoire to better match the opponent he was facing. The monsters in the center of the room would attack only once someone got within close enough range, so he stayed near the entrance of the room while the pages in his floating book flipped furiously.

Name: Allen
Age: 12
Class: Summoner
Level: 49
HP: 1,240 + 1,300
MP: 1,940 + 70
Attack: 682 + 1,000
Endurance: 682 + 1,250
Agility: 1,273 + 250
Intelligence: 1,950 + 1,270
Luck: 1,273
Skills: Summoning {6}, Creation {6}, Synthesis {6}, Strengthening {6}, Awakening {6}, Expansion {5}, Storage, Sharing, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
HolderInsect:
Beast: C x 20
Bird: C x 5
Grass:
Stone: E x 10, C x 4
Fish: C x 1, D x 1
Spirit: C x 19

After the past four months of dungeon delving, Allen was now Lvl. 49 and his four companions were Lvl. 56. All of them began to cautiously inch toward the boss in the center of the room.

“Okay, stop. If we get any closer, it’s gonna trigger the fight.”

In response, all five Frans stopped in their tracks. Right after that, four Stone Cs—suits of steel armor holding giant shields and spears—materialized. Although they could deal damage, these Summons’ specialty was in protecting a target. Living up to that reputation, they immediately used Substitute on Keel and Cecil.

“Okay, just as we planned, I’ll launch the first attack,” Allen said. “Once it’s over, Dogora and Krena—you two jump in there.”

The two gripped their weapons and nodded to show their acknowledgment.

Allen then turned to their magic user. “Cecil.”

“What?”

“Sorry, I’m gonna borrow your spell’s name again.”

“Oh gods. I keep telling you, you don’t need to apologize every time.” Cecil sighed and added under her breath, “What are you, a little kid?”

Allen held out both his hands toward the monsters, his excitement clear from the look on his face.

Let’s goooooo! “Meteoooor!”

Suddenly, ten Stone Es appeared directly above the boss and entered free fall. The monsters started moving in reaction to the Summons’ descending approach.

“All right! Wallys, Explode!”

The gray forms that looked like mortar-covered walls abruptly turned bright red. Before the monsters had time to turn around, molten fragments of the Stone Es and the resulting enormous shock wave tore through their formation.

BOOOOOOOOOM!!!

The sight of destruction before his eyes and the shock wave he felt through his body convinced Keel of victory. “Did we get them?!” he asked excitedly.

Allen shook his head. “Nope, the boss is still ali— Incoming!”

The giant suit of armor burst through the cloud of dust, pounding toward Allen’s party. Even though all ten orc kings had died from the carpet-bombing just now, this massive moving hunk of metal still had a lot of fight left.

“Let’s go!”

Krena cried out as she led the charge on her Bird C. Dogora bellowed in response and followed closely on her heels. The two approached the monster at three hundred kilometers per hour, but it managed to keep up with their movements as it brought down its weapon, a giant greatsword several meters in length.

CRAAAASH!

“You okay, Krena?!” Keel shouted frantically.

Although Krena had blocked the boss’s attack with her own greatsword, the shock wave from the attack had created a fissure on the ground that ran for hundreds of meters. The Bird C that she had been riding was buried up to its feet.

“I’m fine! YAAAAAH!”

Krena’s great sword glowed red as she activated a skill. She blasted the boss’s weapon back with such force that it stumbled backward a step. Krena’s Fran also turned out to be entirely unhurt, its powerful hind legs having entirely absorbed the blow of the previous attack.

Dogora took advantage of this opening to get in a few full-powered swings of his ax. With the target being so large, Allen also directed his

Summons—and Cecil her spells—to concentrate on the upper torso of the monster.

Good, Krena can block the attacks. The fight's started settling down into a steady rhythm.

The fact that the vanguard could properly withstand the boss's attacks meant victory was in sight. It was only a matter of time before the monster fell. Its resistance only meant that it'd take a bit longer than usual.

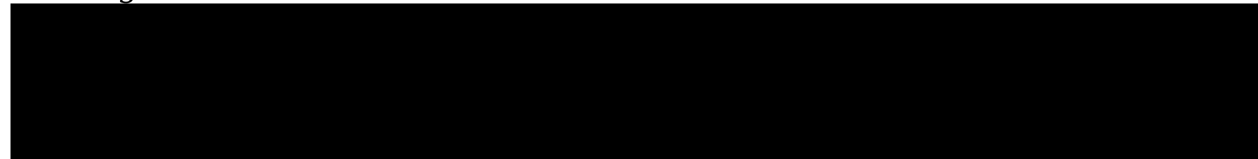
And sure enough, about half an hour later, the giant suit of armor wordlessly collapsed onto its back.

`<You have defeated 1 great warrior. You have earned 480,000 XP.>`

"Heck yeah, we did it!" Dogora roared, bleeding all over from the numerous wounds he had received. Keel cast Healing Magic on the entire party as everyone celebrated in their own way. Before long, the boss's body disappeared, leaving behind a purple magic stone the size of a softball.

As I'd thought, we can totally handle a Rank A monster if we work together. Looks like armor-type bosses are a good match for us.

On a whim, Allen decided to take a look at his companions' Statuses once again.



Name: Krena
Age: 12
Class: Sword Lord
Level: 56
HP: 2,280 + 900
MP: 890
Attack: 2,280 + 900
Endurance: 1,600 + 900
Agility: 1,540 + 900
Intelligence: 910
Luck: 1,115
Skills: Sword Lord {5}, Slash {5}, Flying Slash {5}, Pyroblast {5}, Thunderous Sword {3}, Toughness {1}, Sword Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Limit BreakName: Cecil Granvelle
Age: 13
Class: Wizardess
Level: 56
HP: 960
MP: 1,620 + 600
Attack: 615
Endurance: 1,006

Agility: 951 + 600
Intelligence: 2,230 + 600
Luck: 896
Skills: Wizardry {5}, Fire {5}, Earth {5}, Wind {5}, Water {3}, Wisdom {1}, Sparring {2}
Extra Skill: Petit Meteor
Name: Dogora
Age: 13
Class: Ax User
Level: 56
HP: 1,234 + 300
MP: 668
Attack: 1,625 + 300
Endurance: 1,069
Agility: 676
Intelligence: 450
Luck: 731
Skills: War Ax {5}, Full Might {5}, Flying Hatchet {5}, Explosive Strike {5}, Avalanche Smash {3}, Ax Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Heart and SoulName: Keel
Age: 13
Class: Cleric
Level: 56
HP: 735
MP: 1,399 + 300
Attack: 558
Endurance: 785
Agility: 895
Intelligence: 1,233 + 300
Luck: 1,123
Skills: Cleric {5}, Healing {5}, Solidity {5}, Cure {5}, Magic Wall {3}, Faith {1}, Sword Mastery {3}
Extra Skill: Drops of God

“Whoo! A treasure chest appeared!” Keel whooped. “A Rank A dungeon boss chest! It’s... Aww, it’s wood.”

A chest had appeared slightly behind where the giant suit of armor had fallen. Unfortunately, it was a wooden chest this time. Four months of dungeon delving had confirmed that the probability of getting a wooden chest was around ninety percent and that getting a silver chest was around ten percent. This whole time, the No-life Gamers had yet to see a single gold chest. Allen suspected the probability was around a hundredth of a percent.

“Wow, it’s a hihiirokane ax!” Krena exclaimed.

When the group opened the chest, an ax that was clearly larger than the space inside the chest came out. How this worked was a complete mystery, but apparently the loot was not limited by the size of the chest.

"An ax? Then it goes to Dogora," Allen said emphatically. "Congrats on moving up from mithril, man."

"What?! Are you sure?!" Dogora asked even as he was already reaching out for the weapon. He had zero intention of turning the offer down.

A hihiirokane weapon this size was guaranteed to go for more than three hundred gold. This gave the party reassurance that the rewards from the dungeon boss in Rank A dungeons would be worth at least a hundred gold.

"We did agree to improve our equipment using dungeon drops, after all. If a greatsword appears, it's Krena's. If it's a wand, then it's Cecil's. A rod goes to Keel, and a rapier or normal sword are mine."

In this world, the power of weapons was dependent on the toughness of its material: from weakest to most powerful, it was copper, iron, steel, mithril, hihiirokane, adamantite, then orichalcum. The No-life Gamers were all currently using mithril, so they had discussed beforehand that if anything better appeared, it would go to the person who could use it. It held true even if something made of adamantite or orichalcum was to show up.

Another reason why the Allied forces are losing to the Demon Lord Army could also be their equipment.

There was no point in gathering a large number of fighters if their gear was not up to scratch. The reason why the fight just now took so long could also be chalked up to the No-life Gamers having weak weapons. Allen's aim was to outfit everyone in adamantite before they headed to the battlefield. Orichalcum even, if possible.

Suddenly, something appeared in the room with a *bzzt*, interrupting Allen's thoughts.

"Oh, it's the cube!" Krena exclaimed. She was not on her guard, as what had appeared looked exactly the same as the cubes that always helped transport them around the dungeons.

"Congratulations on clearing your first Rank A dungeon, No-life Gamers."

Hey, it's been a while since we were called by our party name. Hearing it again makes me a little embarrassed.

"I am the Executive Dungeon System. I am here to issue all of you your Rank A dungeon clearance card."

A jet-black card the size of a business card appeared in front of Allen. It was decorated by a symbol that he did not recognize.

"Clearance card? What's that?" Cecil asked dubiously, peering over Allen's shoulder at the card in question.

Wait, I've seen something like this before. Is this what I think it is?

While Allen was thinking about something else, the cube that had identified itself as the EDS continued its explanation.

“The card now has one mark to represent the Rank A dungeon you just cleared. Once you have obtained five marks, you may exchange this card for the right to challenge a Rank S dungeon.”

“I knew it! This is a stamp card!” Allen suddenly shouted, startling Cecil.

While everyone was surprised at learning of the existence of a dungeon even more difficult than Rank A, Allen’s unique response prompted Cecil to then sigh, “Ah, he’s at it again.”

In his previous life, Allen had played games where he could change his character’s class into an even more powerful class following the same chain of progression by completing several quests and challenges; in a way, it was a stamp rally where he was basically getting a stamp for each item on a list. He had no idea why game developers liked using this format. Some major theories among players included that it was because the stamps were a way for the job changes to feel more deserved, or because the developers were stalling for time to work on the next update. Allen suspected that the reason why his memories of his past life kept coming back when he was dungeon delving lay in the similarity in how both worlds worked.

And so, the No-life Gamers had finished clearing their very first Rank A dungeon and obtained their first mark to gain the right to enter a Rank S dungeon.

Chapter 10: The Martial Arts Tournament (Part 1)

It was the first of October. The super fun summer break of dungeon delving was over, and Allen was now thirteen.

A small commotion had ensued when the No-life Gamers showed their Rank A clearance card to the Guild staff. The staff were all aware that every member of their party was only a first-year student. On top of that, the number of people who had successfully cleared a Rank A dungeon were extremely few, even here in Academy City. Generally, it took a normal party—one without access to Allen's Summons—an entire year to get through a Rank A dungeon. Making this much progress in such a short period of time was completely mind-blowing.

As it turned out, the clearance card was the condition for the Guild to release information on Rank S dungeons. The staff member who had handled the Gamers' visit briefed them on a few things.

First, a Rank S dungeon did indeed exist. Once all five marks were gathered, a cube would appear to offer guidance to reach that Rank S dungeon. So far, no one from Ratash had ever managed to brave all the odds and make it that far.

When the No-life Gamers returned to school, news of their exploits had already spread like wildfire. They soon found themselves constantly being approached by other students, with Rifol being one of them. He asked them if they had time during lunch today; judging by his tone, it sounded like it would be a serious discussion, so they agreed. When lunchtime came around, Allen and his friends headed to the empty classroom they had been invited to.

"So, what's going on?" Allen asked. "This doesn't look like a casual meeting to talk about dungeons."

"Well, it's about House Carnel," Rifol replied.

As I expected. Allen turned around to shoot a look at Keel.

Rifol knew about Keel coming from House Carnel. Naturally, he also knew that Cecil belonged to House Granvelle. In fact, the latter was a fact now well-known in the class, thanks to students born in Granvelle greeting her every morning in an attempt to make an impression.

"Which means this is related to Keel?"

"Mm-hm. The royal court is in an uproar again. Any more, and things are going to get out of hand for my father." Rifol drew his eyebrows together, making a troubled face.

Oh, the viscount's been making moves, huh? He still hasn't told me anything yet, though. But still, is that something for a parent family to say?

The concept of parent and child families was a system of hierarchy among nobles. Upper nobles, as parent families, took care of certain lower

nobles tied to them as their child families. House Granvelle's parent family was its neighbor, House Hamilton. As it just so happened, House Carnel was also a child family of House Hamilton. And it was considered a parent family's responsibility to mediate whenever trouble sprang up between its children.

The commotion last year could, therefore, be framed as House Hamilton not properly fulfilling its duties. Allen had no way of knowing just how much Viscount Granvelle had relied on Count Hamilton, but he was familiar enough with the man to know that he must have gone through the proper channels. Unfortunately, House Hamilton just was not in a position to come down too hard on House Carnel when it still commanded such economic influence.

"Did Viscount Granvelle do something?"

The first order of business was to gain a clear picture of the situation. Allen had played a large role in the House Granvelle Affair the previous year by handing over his rights to a mithril mine and spurring the viscount on. This time, however, he did not think he had done all that much to set the man off.

Rifol obliged. Last month, during a royal audience with many nobles present, Viscount Granvelle had approached the throne, knelt down, and said loudly, "Your Majesty's benevolence truly knows no bounds! Thank you for promising the child of former House Carnel a chance to restore his family's status!"

The king had replied, "What are you talking about?" and looked completely confused.

As the other nobles buzzed in confusion, the viscount had continued, "A source told me that a royal envoy visited Carnel, bringing news of an arrangement. From what I heard, the boy was promised the restoration of his house should he complete five years of his duty."

It was at this point that the king had figured out what had happened. The only people who could dispatch royal envoys were the king himself and those who possessed the right to succeed the throne. If it had not been the king, then it must have been another member of the royal family who had dispatched said envoy.

So the king turned to the princes and princesses, who were also present at the audience, and demanded an explanation. However, every one of them claimed ignorance. The king then demanded proof, prompting the viscount to produce magic ship flight records that did indeed detail a royal envoy traveling to Carnel.

Ah, if this happened last month, it means the viscount spent a whole month investigating before making his move.

"So, did they figure out who sent that envoy to Keel?" Allen asked.

"Well, the envoy insisted that he had no recollection of making such a trip and kept mum to the end. However, that envoy and the one who had visited Viscount Granvelle last year both served the same person."

Generally, royal envoys were each assigned to a specific member of the royal family, so a single look at the flight records was enough to tell who the envoys served.

"Well, who was it?" I feel like if I ask any further, I'm gonna get dragged into something huge. But I can't not ask.

"The crown prince. He's the king's nephew and next in line for the throne."

"Does that crown prince happen to have a child?"

"He has a daughter who is currently ten years old. She's Talented, from what I hear."

From the information he was giving out, it was clear that Rifol was fully aware of Keel's circumstances. He sure knows a lot for someone who was supposed to have been focusing on dungeons over the break. Did he have informants in the royal capital regularly coming to Academy City to keep him updated?

"In short, all I wanted to tell you is that Viscount Granvelle has basically picked a fight with someone who even His Majesty can't exactly control. With His Majesty being over seventy years old, everyone is already bracing themselves for the crown prince to take over at any given time."

However, Allen could not care less who was king. So what that means is that someone related to Cecil's kidnapping is still strutting around, having gotten off scot-free.

As part of the fallout of the House Granvelle Affair, many nobles had been rounded up, and all implicated royal envoys had been dealt with. However, it had now been confirmed that the person who had been manipulating those envoys was still alive and well.

In short, the envoy who came to Keel was serving the crown prince, and the king had no knowledge of the arrangement regarding his duty. Even so, Allen did not plan on acting on anything in the near future. He had promised to entrust the matter to the viscount, so he would be staying put unless something happened. As a guest of the family, he would only take action if some disaster were about to befall Viscount Granvelle's or Keel's families.

When lunchtime was over, Allen thanked Rifol for all the information. Ugh, I'm always the one receiving intel from him. My debt to him is just growing larger and larger.

In the afternoon, the students had practical lessons. After checking out all the classes that were available the previous semester, Allen had ultimately decided to focus on his swordsmanship. His aim was to reach Sword Mastery Lvl. 4 by graduation.

"Okay, you lot, line up!" Carlova, who had the Sword Master Talent and served as the main instructor for the class, bellowed.

The students gathered up obediently. As this class contained all the first-year students with sword-related Talents, there were more than two

hundred present. Allen stood next to Krena and Rifol, who was a Swordsman.

"We might be back from break, but the class ain't gonna be much different. Do a thousand practice swings, then find someone to spar with."

"Yes, sir!" Everyone replied with much more gusto than Allen would have expected from a group of middle school kids. They then spread out with plenty of space between each other and began practicing their sword swings. All of them were using steel swords—though they still called them practice swords—so care was needed.

Wow, everyone's movements have gone a lot sharper. Guess all the time going dungeon crawling really did pay off.

Rifol asked Allen to spar with him, to which Allen nodded in reply. This prompted Krena to whine in disappointment.

"Awwww!"

Uh, Krena, you have 3,200 in Attack now. That's a bit much even for me. Please go spar with Carlova instead like you always do. He's here specifically for you, after all—you're literally the reason why they sent him here from the royal capital.

Due to the variety of the cards he was currently maintaining for the Summons Squads, Allen's Attack was only around 1,300 at the moment.

Allen's thoughts were interrupted as Carlova approached them, his greatsword propped on his shoulder. "C'mon, what's the hold up?" Krena pouted a little in disappointment before following him a distance away.

Then the sparring began. The screech of steel clashing against steel filled the air.

Hmm, looks like Rifol's leveled up quite a bit too. I'd estimate his Attack to be around 800, which would make him around Lvl. 35. Dogora had around 1,000 Attack when he was around that level. Rifol's number is probably closer to the average for a first-year with a sword-related Talent.

While exchanging blows with Rifol, Allen could not help but remember Mihai, Cecil's late older brother. He found himself wondering just what Mihai had thought about while attending this school.

CLAAAAAANG!

Suddenly, an earsplitting metallic screech rang out, causing all the students to stop mid-motion. A beat later, Allen could hear someone cheering.

What happened?

"Look, Carlova's giant-ass sword got snapped!"

"Was he not fighting seriously?"

"Krena's broke too!"

Both Krena's and Carlova's practice swords had buckled under the power of their attacks, and the blades had snapped in two.

"Impressive. Wait here a moment," Carlova told her.

"Yes, sir!" Krena replied with her usual energy.

The teacher headed into the school building with his broken sword in hand. Allen watched him go, then resumed sparring with Rifol. Soon, Carlova returned, but with two mithril greatswords—both with their edges unblunted—over his shoulders. One of the other teachers of the class rushed over in a fluster, trying to stop him.

“You can’t do this, Carlova! Those swords are not for practice!”

“Huh? It’ll be fine.”

“How can it be fine?!”

“Hm, this place is a bit too small. Krena, let’s go somewhere more open.” Carlova was pretending he could not hear the other teachers’ complaints.

“Yes, sir!”

The two stepped away to an area removed from the rest of the students and resumed sparring. Mithril clashed against mithril repeatedly. Despite the distance, Allen could still clearly hear the sounds of their fighting.

It looks like Carlova has a slight edge. Just a little. I’d say their stats are pretty much equal, but Carlova’s Sword Mastery is higher. I mean, Krena’s is still only Lvl. 5 right now.

Despite having reached Lvl. 57, Krena still had nowhere near as much experience with the sword as Carlova. That said, the fact that she could give it her all against him was making her very happy, given how wide her smile was and how enthusiastically she was swinging her weapon. Clearly, she found the act of fighting itself enjoyable.

It was true that Krena also practiced sparring with Dogora, but since he only had around 2,000 in Attack, she had to go easy on him. The Rank B monsters she encountered in the dungeons also were becoming less and less of a challenge, although the Rank A boss monsters still excited her with their overwhelming strength. And now, someone even more powerful than her was right before her eyes. This fact apparently pleased her immensely.

Two hours passed, and the school bell rang.

“Now I…understand how…you cleared a…Rank A dungeon,” Carlova said in an appreciative tone as he panted, trying to catch his breath.

Huh? Did he look my way for a moment?

Krena had grown much stronger than Carlova had expected, and he suspected that Allen was involved somehow.

“Thank you—*haah*—very much—*haaah*—sir… Let’s do this again…tomorrow,” Krena replied, equally out of breath.

“I’m sure we will… Oh right. Krena, Allen.”

Just as everyone was about to head back into the school building for homeroom, something came to Carlova’s mind and he called the two back.

“What is it, sir?” Allen asked.

“The headmaster wants to see all the members of your party. After homeroom’s over, go to his office.”

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With afternoon practicals and end-of-day homeroom over, the No-life Gamers headed to one of the other buildings on campus where the

headmaster's office was located. Carlova led the way, eventually coming to a stop before a door that he then announced was their destination. When the group walked inside, however, the headmaster was nowhere to be found.

"Tch. So that's how it's gonna be. You, stay here and wait for me to get back." Carlova went back out to look for the headmaster. Given the way he had clicked his tongue while talking about an actual member of the Rohzenheim royal family, he clearly did not care much about authority.

The students waited on the sofa inside the office. Before long, Carlova returned and told them that the headmaster would be along soon. While he waited with them, the teacher asked, "So, how was the Rank A dungeon?"

"It was massive, so I'm glad we finished it before school resumed," Allen replied. "Honestly, the traps were a lot more trouble than the monsters were."

"Interesting. Well, what's next? Y'all got the clearance card, right?"

"For now, we're hoping to finish the other three Rank A dungeons here in Academy City within a year. Then we'll find the last one somewhere else in Ratash."

"Hot damn! So you're aimin' to get into the Rank S dungeon while you're still in school?!"

Hmm? Carlova sounds really excited about it. Ahh, he's not really questioning our plans; he must simply love dungeon crawling. I can see the former adventurer in him oozing out.

The No-life Gamers had already discussed and agreed to this particular goal. It had taken them four months to clear their first Rank A dungeon , so the simple math meant they could expect to finish three more within one year. However, they were hoping to make the most of their spring break in March next year to try and shorten this to ten months. That way, they would be done within the school year and thus be able to dedicate both months of next year's summer break to that last Rank A dungeon located elsewhere in Ratash.

"Sorry for the wait." As the headmaster came into his office, he briefly apologized for his absence, then settled into another one of the sofas. "I called all of you here because I heard you have cleared a Rank A dungeon. So, I was hoping to discuss the Martial Arts Tournament with you."

"What would that be, sir?" I don't remember ever hearing about such an event.

Noticing Allen's look, the headmaster explained, "Well, it's usually not relevant to first-year students since they're unable to participate. I imagine that's why Carlova hasn't mentioned it to your class before."

This was an event that took place every year in October at the school's arena. Contestants were usually second- and third-year students who, as could be expected from the name of the event, possessed Talents related to fighting with swords, axes, spears, bare fists, and the like. The format was single-elimination, starting off with a hundred contestants in preliminaries

who would then be whittled down to the final sixteen. The last one to remain standing would, of course, be the tournament champion. There would be one day for the preliminaries and one day for the finals.

Only a hundred participants when there are three thousand students in each grade? That's not a lot, to put it mildly.

"Members of the royal family and foreign dignitaries will also be in attendance."

"Oh, wow."

"Which brings us back to the beginning. I was thinking of having you two, Allen and Krena, take part in this tournament."

The sudden invitation from the headmaster prompted both a cheer from Krena and bewilderment from Allen at the same time.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Do you have a question?"

"Sir, why me? Did you mean to invite Dogora instead?"

"This tournament is a bit beyond Dogora at his current strength. All participants need a recommendation, and I don't think we can give him one just yet."

They're keeping their standards pretty high, I see. So a first-year with only a one-star Talent can't quite make it.

"My Attack is only 'E,' though," Allen pointed out. "How could I be more suitable for the tournament than Dogora?"

Allen was aware that he was specced for support and that fighting with a weapon was not his strong suit.

"The use of skills is allowed in this tournament. You can use your abilities as a Summoner as much as you want."

Is he inviting me because he wants to see Summoning in action? He did ask for a demonstration back during my entrance exam too, where I showed him Mousey.

Allen would never hesitate if he had to do something for the sake of someone close to him or to pay back a debt. Conversely, he would never do anything he had no interest in or thought was meaningless. And it just so happened that he thought fights between players—commonly called PVP, which stood for "player versus player"—was the most pointless thing in games. He was completely fine with fighting for the sake of training or leveling up, but the way he saw it, fighting for any other reason was utterly fruitless—he subscribed to the maxim "nothing comes of PVP." Naturally, this sentiment of his extended to tournaments, which were practically established on the concept of people fighting each other.

"I'm sorry, sir. My abilities are truly nothing incredible. Certainly not anything that would warrant giving me priority over my upperclassmen, who've worked so hard to get to where they are."

"What if I told you that the winner gets the chance to have a match with Sword Lord Dverg."

“That sounds like a wonderful opportunity. I can’t wait to see just how well Krena would fare against a Sword Lord active in the field.”

It’d serve as a good point of reference for how strong Krena is currently and how much further she can grow.

“How well Krena fares, is it? So, you insist on not participating?”

“I can if you want me to, sir, but I’ll lose in the first round. I don’t really have anything to gain, do I?”

Carlova and the other members of the No-life Gamers were also listening to this exchange between Allen and the headmaster. Carlova, for one, seemed to appreciate Allen’s attitude as a fellow adventurer. Cecil was sighing as if saying, “This again.” She had seen Allen act this way many times before when he was working for her House.

“So you’d consider it if you had something to gain? Mm, yes. The royal family will be coming as well. If you win, you might just catch their eye.”

“The royal family? You don’t say.”

“That’s right. Now are you interested?”

“Not even a little.”

“I...see. Well, I suppose that’s that.”

Ah, he gave up. I guess he really isn’t going to force me.

“Just out of curiosity, specifically which member of the royal family will be coming?”

“The crown prince, I believe.”

Oh, the crown prince! I really have to get a look at his face.

In the end, Allen turned down the headmaster’s recommendation, and talks proceeded with Krena being the only one of them to participate. Soon, the second week of October arrived, and the crown prince—who had such a history with the No-life Gamers—appeared in Academy City.

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The Academy Martial Arts Tournament had begun. The preliminaries had finished the day before, reducing the initial one hundred fighters to the top sixteen.

One aim of this tournament was to prove that this Academy was fulfilling its objective of preparing youngsters to fight against the Demon Lord Army. Similar tournaments were held all across the world at the other Academies as well. This was why foreign VIPs were also allowed to come and spectate. Many of these appeared to be secretaries, who could be seen taking notes during the matches.

The finals began at nine in the morning, and the contestant who continuously won until they were the last one standing would be declared the champion. After they won, said champion would then get to duel Sword Lord Dverg.

The tournament proceeded at a brisk pace, and soon Krena found herself facing a hulking older student who also wielded a greatsword.

This arena had spectator stands along its two main sides. Two-thirds of the stands were made up of five thousand students, with the remaining one-

third reserved for special viewing boxes for aristocrats—such as the crown prince—and visiting dignitaries. Those wearing obviously expensive clothing had knights standing protectively at their backs.

Allen sent a Bird E up from his seat in the stand, where it flew high into the sky and trained Hawk Eye on the man in the grandiose chair sitting in the middle of all the aristocrats.

So, that's the crown prince. I'm glad I got a chance to know what he looks like this early on. I don't see his supposed ten-year-old daughter.

The crown prince appeared to be in his forties, and he had his hair slicked back like a character from a Western TV show. Allen's first impression was that if he were an actor, he'd be suitable for playing villains. At the moment, he was watching the match while speaking to someone next to him—likely a retainer or a minister.

The match is almost over. Krena's opponent lasted longer than I'd expected.

"Krena sure has grown a lot," said the man with hawk-like eyes sitting next to Allen. "She's pushing that third-year against the ropes."

"Yes, my lord," Allen replied.

Allen was currently sitting in the aristocrat seats next to Cecil and the viscount—with full permission from the Academy, of course. It was just last week that Krena's participation in the tournament had been decided, but when Allen informed Viscount Granvelle of the news through a Bird F, the man had replied that he would attend and hurried to Academy City with Captain Zenof in tow. Hearing that the crown prince, who had masterminded Cecil's kidnapping, would be present probably worried him.

"Can you believe it?! Ladies and gentlemen! Krena, who's only a first-year student, has bested Tribelga to win the tournament!!!"

A magic tool blared the commentator's words throughout the entire arena. Krena's opponent, who had been the audience favorite to win, had let go of his weapon and was lying spread-eagle on the ground. There was no room for doubt—she had indeed won. Both the student body and aristocrats stirred with astonishment at this outcome. All in all, the match had brought many things to light: how powerful a Sword Lord truly was, how far a Sword Lord could pull ahead compared to other Talents, and just how important of a factor Talent was.

"We'll now have a short break. When we come back, Sword Lord Dverg will be having an exhibition match with the tournament champion, Sword Lord Krena!"

Krena and her opponent thanked each other and left the stage accompanied by supportive applause and cheering.

The fact that Krena's weapon was made of hihiirokane when her opponent's was mithril probably played a part too. Boy, he sure spammed his skills.

Participants were allowed to use their skills in this tournament. However, Krena had only acquired her hihiirokane sword just the other day,

so she had refrained from using any skills out of fear of hurting her opponent. She had yet to gain a firm grasp on exactly how much upgrading her weapon had increased her damage output, but she did know it was significant.

"Allen, I won!" Krena called out as she ran toward the group like she was a child coming back from finishing a race on Sports Day.

"Great job out there, Krena." Allen managed to get out some praise right before those sitting around him began to start heaping their own onto Krena.

Uh, the crown prince is looking our way.

Through the Bird E above, Allen noticed that the man sitting in the highest seat—the one reserved for royalty—was staring in the direction where Krena was happily conversing with her companions. After a short while, he shifted his gaze.

Once the break was over, Allen and the others turned back to observe the stage where the two Sword Lords now stood facing each other.

"Without further ado, here's the duel between our tournament champion and Sword Lord Dverg! Will he beat back the champion with his overwhelming swordsmanship once again?!"

When the referee announced the start of the match, Dverg addressed Krena appreciatively. "Well done making it this far so soon after learning how to use your first skill."

"Thank you, sir!"

"You have good companions. Make sure you treasure them."

"I will, sir!"

Now finished talking, Dverg raised his gleaming black adamantite greatsword high overhead. He murmured under his breath, "I am he who hunts monsters. I am he who buries demons. I am he who brings ruin to Demonic Deities."

Krena, who had raised her hihiirokane greatsword in response, tilted her head. "I'm sorry, what did you say, sir?"

Ignoring her question, Dverg's single remaining eye shot open wide as he shouted, "Come, Sword Lord Krena! Throw everything you have at me!"

"Okay!" Krena charged forward in the blink of an eye with her sword still up in the air. However, when she brought down that terrifying blade, it was parried without effort.

"What was that?! I told you to throw *everything* at me. Why didn't you use the skill I taught you?!"

"Oof!"

Dverg's kick caught Krena squarely in her stomach, driving all the air out of her lungs. She bounced on the ground a few times before finally coming to a stop. Allen and his companions inadvertently leaned forward and called out to her, but she kept her eyes on Dverg even as she lay on the ground. This was not an opponent she could afford to look away from. Eventually, she slowly got to her feet, readjusting her grip on her

greatsword. The lingering pain from the kick was interfering with her breathing, but she tried to recover in between shuddering coughs.

"What? You done? Then it's my turn to attack. Brace yourself, Sword Lord Krena!"

For the first time ever, Dverg took the initiative. His initial step forward created a shock wave that sent cracks all across the stone surface of the stage. Krena, who had yet to fully recover, activated a skill to fend him off, but he used his own skills in turn.

Roughly ten minutes later, Krena was on the ground covered with cuts and gashes all over; meanwhile, Dverg peered down at her, almost completely unhurt. The medic team hurried onto the stage to carry off the girl who was bleeding from head to toe. The audience had fallen completely silent at the one-sided beating they had just witnessed.

Allen and his companions hurried to the infirmary and found Krena being tended to by a few healers. Allen pushed through them and immediately used a Frond of Life to bring her back to full health, astonishing the members of the medical team.

Krena opened her eyes. When she met Allen's gaze, she mumbled regretfully, "I lost, Allen..."

He looked right into her eyes and simply called her name. "Krena."

"Yeah?"

"Dverg bested you in stats, skills, and equipment, right?"

"Mm-hm, he did."

Dverg had been superior on all fronts. The difference had been unsurmountable. It did not take a genius to be able to tell that Dverg had never even gotten serious in the match just now.

"In other words...one day, you'll get at least as strong as that, right?"

Krena's eyes widened in comprehension. "I see..." she murmured, the fire quickly returning to her eyes. "You're right. I can!"

No further explanation was needed. If she did not have enough strength at this very moment, she simply had to build herself up. This was exactly what she had been doing all along; nothing had changed. Now, though, she knew just how incredible a Sword Lord could become.

"Let's work hard so that you can beat him after next year's Martial Arts Tournament."

"Sure!"

Thus the curtains closed on the Martial Arts Tournament, with Krena having learned how powerful Sword Lord Dverg was and setting a goal for herself—to defeat him the following year.

Chapter 11: Invitation from the Crown Prince

The Martial Arts Tournament had ended with Krena taking home the championship but losing to Sword Lord Dverg. Now, she had made it her goal to fight him again next year and win.

In all likelihood, having the tournament champion duel Dverg was a measure to prevent said champion from getting overconfident. After graduation, these students would be headed for the battlefield. Previous winners that were too full of themselves acting without orders on the front lines would not only put themselves but possibly their entire troop in danger, even potentially causing their deaths.

After the tournament, a ceremony was to be held in one of the academy's halls. The top sixteen participants were all invited, as were the various foreign dignitaries and aristocrats, including Viscount Granvelle. Naturally, Allen had not been invited, but he had slipped a Bird G into Krena's pocket so he could tell what was going on as if he were there in person.

Krena did not receive a trophy, medal, or monetary reward—however, the crown prince did give a speech congratulating her on behalf of everyone present. He finished off his toast with, "You fought well indeed, young woman. Continue wielding your sword for the sake of our country."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Krena replied in a loud voice that reverberated throughout the venue. Allen could not see the prince's face, but judging by the stir that ran through the surrounding guests, he was taken aback by quite a bit.

By the time the ceremony ended, the moon had already climbed high into the sky. Allen walked Krena back to the base, where they found Viscount Granvelle waiting for them in the multipurpose room they usually ate their meals in. He was there for his secondary reason for coming to Academy City. Before him sat Keel and Nina; Cecil and Dogora were present as well.

"Hmm. I do discern Viscount Carnel's features on your face," the viscount mused aloud.

"Y-Yes, sir," Keel replied, somewhat nervous. He was well aware that he was facing the man who had caused the House Granvelle Affair. As the next head of House Carnel, the boy was doing his best to put on a brave face.

The man sighed. "You don't have to be on your guard, you know. I only came by today to bring this."

One of the knights standing behind the viscount approached Keel and placed a piece of parchment on the table, spreading it out.

"What is this, sir?"

"A contract. With His Majesty's signature."

Keel, Cecil, and Dogora all repeated the word “contract” softly under their breaths. Krena alone nodded and went, “I see, I see,” indicating that she had no idea what was going on.

The contract specified the conditions related to Keel restoring House Carnel. First, the boy had to carry out his duty under the command of either the Kingdom of Ratash or the Five Continent Alliance. Second, notable military achievements could potentially shorten the five-year service period. Just as the viscount said, the parchment carried the king’s name and the royal seal.

“In other words, His Majesty is officially promising to restore House Carnel?” Keel asked hesitantly.

The viscount nodded. “That’s right.”

Up until now, the deal had been nothing more than the word of a royal envoy. However, after two months of maneuvering in the royal court, Viscount Granvelle had obtained official confirmation from the king in the form of a physical contract. The royal family only issued contracts for extremely important matters and when dealing with major nobles or other nations. In short, it did so very rarely. Normally, minor matters between nobles were settled by one of the ministers. And yet this time, the king had written one up for Keel alone.

“Why...did you go to such lengths for me?” Keel asked, sounding mystified. He could not understand this special treatment in light of what his father, Viscount Carnel, had done. Moreover, according to Rifol, the crown prince already had his eye on the viscount, and not in a good way.

“Nobles uphold their contracts. Nobles also take responsibility for their actions. This is me doing what needs to be done as the head of House Granvelle.” The viscount continued, saying that he did not regret taking down House Carnel in the slightest. However, even though he had done it for the sake of his daughter, he did feel a certain degree responsible for cornering a neighboring territory of so many centuries to the point of ruin. What he did for Keel was the result of him seriously considering what was demanded of his station.

“Next, take another look at the contract. It is also signed by Count Hamilton and myself.”

“I’m sorry?”

Sure enough, there were two more signatures on the parchment. Below them was more text.

“M-My lord, this is...”

“Restoring a house that’s been completely dismantled is a huge undertaking. Count Hamilton’s and my signatures there compel us to assist you with the process. House Hamilton will become House Carnel’s parent family again, and both of our Houses will aid you as much as possible.”

The viscount continued, saying that, although it was not explicitly written in the contract, Nina and the servants would be given a place to live at the Hamilton mansion while Keel was away on duty.

“Thank you very much, sir.”

The words of gratitude flowed naturally from Keel’s mouth. He could feel the hatred and resentment that he had felt toward House Granvelle melting away in his heart. Without hesitation, he picked up a pen and signed the contract right then and there as Nina looked on. His dream of reestablishing his family name had just taken a massive step toward becoming realized.

When Keel had finished signing, the viscount added, “However, there is something you have to keep in mind.”

Unsurprisingly, the king was not in the best of health. He was fast approaching seventy years old, which was considered very old in this world. Consequently, he was often bedridden as of late and increasingly leaving his royal duties to his nephew, the crown prince, instead.

The restoration of House Carnel was to begin five years after Keel’s graduation. That said, there was a reasonable chance that the crown prince would have ascended to the throne by then. Although the contract would remain in effect if he had, there was no guarantee it would still be carried out.

Even so, Keel did not look worried. “It does not matter. I *will* become a noble again, and I will do whatever it takes to make sure of that.” He then asked the viscount to hold on to the contract for safekeeping, just in case the crown prince came looking for it to destroy it after he became king.

Seeing that the conversation was over, Allen ducked into the next room to bring over a small box. “Sir, please accept this as thanks from our entire party.”

The viscount was overcome by this gesture of gratitude from the group of children his daughter’s age. “Thank you. I will open it now, then,” he said, pulling back the lid of the box. “Hm? A ring?”

“Yes, sir,” Allen replied. “This is an Anti-Poison Ring we obtained from a dungeon.”

The entire party had agreed together to give the viscount this drop from the Rank A dungeon. However, after the viscount pulled out an actual contract signed by the king, Allen now believed that it was an insufficient token of appreciation.

“Are you all sure about this? I would rather Cecil wear it, though.”

There were monsters with poisonous attacks in the dungeons. The viscount was about to turn down the gift out of his consideration for his daughter.

“Don’t worry, father. We take potions every day that protect us from all status effects.”

Although Cecil called them “potions” so her father would understand, she was actually referring to Grass C’s Awakened Ability, Potherb, which completely removed debuffs from all party members within a radius of fifty meters as well as granted protection from them for the next twenty-four hours. Allen used one every morning at breakfast, affecting even Nina and

the servants, who were not adventurers. As it turned out, the conditions for who was considered a party member was much looser than he had first thought.

Deeply moved, Viscount Granvelle gazed at the ring before looking up. “Cecil, you’ve found some very good friends.”

It had been thirty years since the viscount had first joined noble society, and in that time he had navigated countless plots and intrigues that filled the world of nobility. He now realized it had been a long time since the word “friend” last left his lips.

After conversing a while more, the viscount came to a start. “It appears I’ve stayed for quite some time,” he said, standing up. “Zenof, we’re heading back.”

“Please stay the night with us, sir.” Allen insisted.

He was about to add that they had plenty of rooms when a commotion sounded outside the front door. He headed over, puzzled at what it could be, and found two men standing outside. One was holding an illumination magic tool that revealed the royal crest on the carriage they had arrived in.

“May I ask what is your business at this late hour, good sirs?” Allen asked.

One of the men sniffed irritably. “Viscount Granvelle is here, yes? We’re looking for him.”

“Viscount Granvelle, sir?”

“That’s right.”

The men had rather overbearing attitudes despite calling so late. Allen recognized what they were wearing—their clothing matched the outfit that the man who had accompanied Viscount Carnel to Granvelle mansion wore.

“The hour is late, so the viscount has already retired to his room. May I ask who I should tell him is visiting?”

“We’re royal envoys. Tell him we’re here on business from the crown prince.”

“Very well, sir. Allow me to show you to the drawing room.”

Allen opened the door all the way and led the two visitors, not to the usual multipurpose room but to a smaller drawing room furnished only with a pair of loveseats facing each other. He then returned to the multipurpose room to inform the viscount about the envoys’ arrival. The viscount headed over to the other room with Allen and Zenof in tow. Once everyone was gathered, the envoys revealed that the crown prince had heard Viscount Granvelle was in Academy City and that he wanted to have dinner together the next day.

The viscount, who had intended on catching the afternoon magic ship home, said, “Th-That’s rather sudden...”

“Are you implying that you wish to turn down His Highness’s invitation? That is fine as well. We can convey your decision.”

“Of course not. The invitation honors me, and I would be delighted to attend.”

Zenof cut in. “My lord, I shall accompany you.”

“What is this? Viscount, do you feel the need to be accompanied by a guard while dining with His Highness? Is this some kind of statement?”

Having been told in a roundabout way to come alone, the viscount found himself at a loss for an answer. He was aware that he and the crown prince were on rather tenuous terms, and were anything to happen to him, all fault would fall on himself for being careless enough to attend without a guard. Would he simply disappear? Or would there be a cover story about getting assaulted by hoodlums on his way back? No matter what happened, no one would fault the crown prince for it.

Just as one of the envoys was about to press Viscount Granvelle for an answer, Allen spoke up. “My lord, if you will be dining with the crown prince tomorrow night, then I shall come as well.” Although he was wearing his school uniform, he bowed like he had done as a manservant.

He was making the point that it was uncustomary for nobles to head out alone, and so was offering to go along as an attendant. Back when Allen had quit and become a guest of House Granvelle, he had stopped calling the viscount “my lord” and switched to using “sir.” The viscount looked startled for a second at Allen reverting his manner of address, but quickly accepted the offer. After Cecil’s kidnapping incident, he knew that Allen could be relied on in a fight.

I’m glad I never returned my manservant uniform. It’s only been six months since I quit, so it should still fit me.

The only thing Allen had returned was the House Granvelle crest carried by servants. He had not given back the uniform, which was still “sleeping” in his Storage. He was aware he had grown a bit taller since he had quit his post, being in puberty and all, but he figured it would not be enough to look awkward in the outfit and raise suspicions.

The envoys made no protest regarding a manservant coming along. Their reaction amounted to “So you had a manservant enrolled at the Academy.” After pressing home that the viscount was to arrive on time, they then got up and left.

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The next day came. Viscount Granvelle, with only Allen as an escort, headed to the high-class inn where the crown prince was staying. Cecil had said that she wanted to go too, but her father talked her out of it. After all, the royal envoy involved with arranging her kidnapping had been in the crown prince’s service, so there was no telling what dangers might be in store. Allen agreed with the viscount’s call.

So, the crown prince is in the Kingdom faction, huh...

A week ago, Allen happened to ask Rifol about the crown prince and the royal court in general. One thing that he ended up learning was that, after the Demon Lord appeared, two factions had formed within the Ratashian government: the Kingdom faction and the Alliance faction. Needless to say, the two were constantly at each other’s throats.

The Kingdom faction believed that the national interest was of top priority, and that Ratash ought to send only the bare minimum of aid to the Allied effort. To support their stance, the Kingdom faction often brought up the fact that before the Demon Lord, Ratash had suffered centuries of invasions from expansionist Giamut. “How dare Giamut be so bold-faced to turn around and ask for help?” was the general attitude of this faction. It would indeed be catastrophic if the Giamutan Empire fell to the Demon Lord Army, but nothing was better than the two permanently locked in eternal conflict.

On the other hand, the Alliance faction agreed with the ideals of the Five Continent Alliance and believed in prioritizing international cooperation. In this day and age when the Demon Lord was threatening the entire world, being occupied with self-interest was simply reprehensible in their mind. The Academy faction was a smaller clique within this faction.

One large reason why the rift between these two factions had grown so deep was because the Alliance faction had been in control for two consecutive reigns. This had led to the Land Reclamation Decree and the establishment of the system rewarding veterans with prominent positions in the royal court and fiefdom-wide tax cuts. No expense had been spared in helping the war effort against the Demon Lord Army.

This had fostered significant discontent among the major noble families that formed the old guard. As they rarely had Talented children, they could only watch as the lower nobility continued accruing benefits when their Talented children returned from the battlefield. Lately, not only had the Alliance faction taken over the top ranks in the military, but they were also beginning to encroach upon ministerial positions. The upper nobility believed that it was only a matter of time before they lost their standing.

Therefore, they decided to throw their support behind the crown prince, the son of the current king’s older brother. In turn, the crown prince actively worked to unite the Kingdom faction under his name. The current king had a son of his own, but when put under the pressure from the most influential nobles at court, he had had no choice but to name his nephew as his successor. And now that he was old, his influence was waning along with his health.

Whereas the Kingdom faction was made up of the most powerful noble houses, the Alliance faction had a strong grip on the military through its ties with the Academy. Because these two factions differed on such a fundamental level ideologically yet were roughly equal with each other in terms of power, Ratash remained broken and divided. The crown prince had gone so far as vowing to halve the support Ratash would send to the Alliance.

When Viscount Granvelle and Allen reached the inn, an envoy guided them to a waiting room. “Please wait in here.”

“Mm.”

So, this is an inn for members of the royal family to use. Oh! I've never seen this type of fruit before. Lemme take a bite— Oh yum, this is delicious!

Allen gleefully helped himself to the fruit on the table. After all, he was probably going to remain on his feet afterward and would not get much to eat. The viscount said he did not need any fruit, so Allen put all of the rest into his Storage. The two then went back to waiting, but despite how much time had passed, no one came to pick them up. Eventually, Allen sat down next to one of the potted decorative plants.

"What're you doing?" the viscount asked him.

"Making recovery items. I'll give you some. Use them when you need to."

"Really? How kind."

"Anytime, sir."

Allen was always busy these days creating recovery items. Each week, he received a total of thirty thousand Rank D and E magic stones from the Adventurer's Guild, three times the amount he had been processing before summer break. He was turning all of them into Fronds of Life and Seeds of Magic. Normally, he did this on the sly during morning classes; however, due to the sharp increase in the number of stones, he was starting to fall behind. Now, whenever he had a spare moment, he would dedicate it to Creating, Synthesizing, Strengthening, and Awakening cards.

My Summons Squads are taking quite a beating in the Rank A dungeons. I really wanna reach Strengthening Lvl. 7 as soon as possible.

Another hour passed.

They sure are making us wait a lot. Can they hurry it up? I have a feeling today's gonna be the day when we get a gold treasure chest, so I want to get back in time to fill our Rank A dungeon quota.

One more hour passed.

Okay, this is waaay too much waiting. Seriously, get a move on already! Return me my gold chest! I feel like today's the only day it'll show.

Allen was getting irritable enough to start feeling like it was the crown prince's fault that his party had yet to see a single gold treasure chest. Only then did a royal envoy come to fetch Viscount Granvelle and Allen. He led them to the extravagant dining room on the top floor reserved for royalty. The man sitting by himself at the massive table—hair swept back, a glass of wine in one hand, and looking every inch a villain—was Invel von Ratash, crown prince of Allen's home country.

"Looks like I kept you waiting," Prince Invel said coolly.

"A small price for the honor of an audience with you, Your Highness," Viscount Granvelle replied, as if implying that he would be willing to wait no matter how long it took.

C'mon, do you have any idea what you made me miss? Although, admittedly, I did come here of my own free will.

"Mm, I like that attitude of yours. I can only hope everyone in the Alliance faction takes a page from you someday."

Behind the crown prince stood several knights in full armor. The viscount gasped a little when he laid eyes on them. Allen stepped forward to pull the viscount's seat back for him, then stood behind the chair. Throughout the process, Allen made sure to avoid eye contact with the prince, who only cast his eyes over the boy for a split second and thought nothing more than that he was a young attendant.

The food was carried in, and the two men commenced their meal without a word. The knights remained stock still, staring straight at the viscount. They appeared ready to draw their swords at a moment's notice. At the very least, the viscount was protected against any attempts at poisoning him, as Allen had had him consume a Potherb ahead of time.

Suddenly, the crown prince broke the silence. "Yesterday was quite the surprise. Are you properly disciplining Sword Lord Krena? She was barking like a loud dog. And Sword Lord Dverg was certainly his usual self, heading straight back to the battlefield without so much as a 'by-your-leave.'"

He was referring to Krena loudly replying to him both at the arena and the ceremony. As for Dverg, he had skipped the ceremony outright and boarded the first magic ship to Giamut instead. Based on what the crown prince was saying, the Sword Lord had not even gone over to greet him. According to Rifol, Dverg had always been like that. Of the numerous stories circulating about him, there was a particularly famous one about how he had skipped his own marquess appointment ceremony at the royal palace to go fight on the battlefield instead.

"Sword Lord Krena is being allowed to grow as she wishes at the moment. Allow me to apologize on her behalf for her disrespectful attitude toward Your Highness." The viscount lowered his head in apology.

"I see. It must be the right call, seeing how she managed to seize the championship."

"Thank you for your understanding, Your Highness."

"And things are going well for your fiefdom too, I hear."

"I-I'm sorry, Your Highness? I-I suppose so..."

"A Sword Lord was born in your realm and now you're able to mine mithril again. You've even managed to destroy your archrival. Everything's just been smooth sailing for you, hasn't it? Tell me, do you have any advice for how to make the stars turn in my favor?"

"'Destroy' is a bit..."

The viscount's oldest son, Mihai, had died on the battlefield, so it could hardly be said that everything had been "smooth sailing" for him. However, he chose not to bring it up. Instead, he gently rebuffed the usage of the term "destroy."

"Your performance at the audience hall was quite impressive."

"Performance, Your Highness?"

"Was it not an act?"

The crown prince stared pointedly at the viscount as the knights behind him shifted their weight forward slightly. It was as if the entire room was waiting for his reply.

However, the viscount chose to remain silent. Eventually, it was the crown prince who backed off.

"That aside, His Majesty sure has gotten eccentric over the years, going so far as to issue such a contract for a mere child of some now-defunct minor noble House. And thanks to *someone* fanning the flames, now I've had to get involved too."

Ah, so silence was the right answer just now.

The crown prince shook his head and shrugged his shoulders as if lamenting something unbelievable. Apparently word of the contract written up for Keel's sake had reached his ears.

"As a joint signatory on that contract," the viscount said in an even tone, "I will also cooperate to the best of my abilities once the young man finishes his duty and returns to restore his House."

"Once he finishes his duty, you say." A smirk appeared on the prince's face, as if he had been waiting for this moment.

Allen perked up. *Huh?*

"Is there a problem with what I said?"

"If I recall correctly, the wording of that contract was such that Ratash could decide where the young man in question is to be stationed. I was thinking of sending him with the Sword Lord. Giamut's been pressuring me to send them eager fighters, you see."

Clearly, the crown prince knew that Keel now lived with Krena. And he was right about what the contract said.

Oh, is he going to send them to a particularly dangerous part of the front line? Please make it the most dangerous spot!

Allen was doing his best to maintain a blank face, but a smile still slipped out for a brief moment.

"I...see."

"Of course, since your daughter is apparently a part of their party, she would be accompanying them as well."

Viscount Granvelle leaped to his feet. "Now just hold on a moment, Your Highness! Please!"

The knights immediately reacted by reaching for their blades, but the prince gestured for them to stand down. "Why are you so surprised? Those of you in the Alliance faction only care about fulfilling your *duty*, right? And every division of the front lines needs personnel."

This was what the crown prince had wanted to get at. In short, he was telling the viscount that the cost of cooperating with the Five Continent Alliance would be the life of his daughter. None of the Sword Lords born in Ratash after Dverg had survived. Keel and Krena dying pointless deaths would serve as a potent warning of what would happen to those in the Alliance faction who opposed the crown prince. Furthermore, by sending

the newly born Sword Lord to a demanding corner of the battlefield, he could maintain the appearance of being cooperative with Giamut. Everything about this arrangement benefitted the crown prince.

Interesting. So the crown prince has a head on his shoulders after all. All right, looks like it's about time for me to take action. Otherwise, the viscount might start making concessions.

"This sounds like a great opportunity for earning military accolades," Allen said so softly only the viscount could hear.

"What?! Allen, what do you mean by that?!" the viscount demanded, sounding agitated.

"Please rest assured, sir. I will protect Lady Cecil. There is nothing to fear."

"Hm? What is the matter? Which reminds me—you with the black hair..." The crown prince looked suspiciously at the manservant that the viscount was so furiously whispering with and suddenly recalled Krena conversing frequently with this boy at the arena yesterday. Black hair was a rarity in this world, so it had left an impression.

"Yes, Your Highness?" Allen bowed slightly in greeting.

"You were there. At the arena."

"Yes, Your Highness. I was watching the tournament as one of the Sword Lord's companions."

"You're a companion of hers?"

"Yes, Your Highness. We are in a party together, of which I am the leader. Lady Cecil and Keel are also members of the same party." *And Dogora too.*

"You're the leader? Not the Sword Lord?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Strength is not all there is to being a leader, after all."

"You at least know how to speak, young man. In that case, what is your opinion of what was just discussed?"

"I could not be more grateful for the increased opportunity to make our mark on the battlefield."

"Pfft!" Viscount Granvelle could not help but spit out the food in his mouth. His very soul seemed to have escaped too, by the looks of things, leaving him on the verge of fainting. He was probably fervently wishing he had come alone.

"Viscount, that's disgusting." Prince Invel chided before turning back to Allen. "Well, unlike the current king, *I* have no intention of making a serf a marquess. However, if your achievements merit it, I might consider giving you a reward." He smiled as if looking at a brat who had no idea what he was talking about.

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Allen cried, bowing deeply.

Good, that went well. Did I come across as a mere servant dreaming of riding on the Sword Lord's coattails?

Eventually, the dinner was over and all parties went their own way, with whirling thoughts driven by differing purposes and motives filling their heads.

Chapter 12: Rank A Dungeon Boss

Three months passed, and it was now January. After a modest New Year's celebration, the days of dungeon delving resumed. The Academy's academic calendar only had two prolonged holidays during summer and spring, with spring break beginning in March. This meant that the first was the only holiday for the month of January. When he discovered this arrangement, Allen was shocked—as a former Japanese, he was used to getting the first three days of the year off, all of which he would spend gaming from morning to night.

The No-life Gamers' routine remained the same as before: On days with classes, they visited all the dungeons they had previously cleared in turn, fighting the final bosses. On the weekends, they spent the entirety of both days progressing through a new dungeon. They aimed to clear one floor of a Rank A dungeon per weekend, meaning they would camp out overnight.

Because of how long it took to get through the dungeons with their labyrinthian layouts, the Academy had a "dungeon leave" system—if a student went dungeon delving on a day off but could not get back out in time and therefore ended up missing school, they simply had to submit a request for dungeon leave the following day and it would not be counted against their attendance record. Even the No-life Gamers, who had Bird C mounts to serve as rapid transit, had ended up relying on this system twice before January after falling victim to Teleport Traps. Even though Allen constantly had three Bird Cs running ahead to trigger as many traps as possible, this strategy was not entirely foolproof.

The Adventurer's Guild was aware of how many parties were challenging Rank A dungeons at any given time. Five to ten such parties resided in Academy City, and they supposedly only went back to fight the bosses on the deepest floors once or twice each week. When Allen and his friends had participated in the Auction for the first time this month, they found that all the items dropped from dungeon bosses were worth far more than they had expected. It made sense, of course—the supply itself was extremely limited.

The Auction venue had been bursting with people, many of whom were merchants from the royal capital and other major cities. Before every Auction, the Guild would use communication magic tools to share the catalog between its branches. This way, merchants who saw items they were interested in would know to head over via magic ship.

This same communication technology was used for Ratash-Giamut diplomacy as well. In fact, it could even be used to reach countries on other continents, such as Baukis and Rohzenheim. When he first heard this, Allen marveled once again at how crucial Baukis's technology had become for the world at large.

In any case, the No-life Gamers were on track to clear their second Rank A dungeon before the end of the month. Along the way, Allen had finally

obtained Strengthening Lvl. 7, which raised two stats by +1,000 for each card. His Summons could now last even longer against Rank B monsters, so he now had Summons Squads constantly roaming about in the Rank A dungeon.

Allen's Strengthened Summons now fared much better against any traps that might suddenly surround them with a horde of monsters, as well as against abyss boxes, Rank A monsters that looked like wooden chests but were far more powerful than mimics. The party also sported much better gear compared to three months ago. At the end of the day, equipment truly was a major factor in getting stronger.

Allen's Equipment

- Hihiirokane Sword
- HP Ring (+100 HP)
- Attack Ring (+500 Attack)

Krena's Equipment

- Hihiirokane Greatsword
- Attack Ring (+100 Attack)
- Attack Ring (+100 Attack)

Cecil's Equipment

- Rod of Light Magic
- HP Ring (+100 HP)
- Intelligence Ring (+100 Intelligence)

Dogora's Equipment

- Adamantite Ax
- HP Ring (+100 HP)
- Attack Ring (+100 Attack)

Keel's Equipment

- Rod of Judgment
- HP Ring (+500 HP)
- HP Ring (+100 HP)

Oftentimes, the party was not sure of the effects of items they had picked up. In such cases, they simply had to take the item in question to an analyst in town. Analysts were professionals who appraised magical gear such as rings and armor for what sorts of effects they provided. Their service fees were based on the rank of the dungeon and the type of chest

the item came from; for example, an item from a wooden chest in a Rank A dungeon cost one gold to analyze, an item from a silver chest in a Rank A dungeon cost three gold to analyze, and so on and so forth. Analysts could find out rather detailed information, making their service indispensable. The Analyze skill was a major deal.

Since the No-life Gamers had largely gathered all the equipment they needed over the past three months, they decided to begin putting their excess drops up for sale at the Auction.

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“That’s a dragon,” Dogora observed out loud.

“That it is,” Allen agreed.

Today was a school day, so the No-life Gamers were once again on the deepest floor of a Rank A dungeon as part of their daily quota. Before their eyes lay what looked like a Western dragon, complete with wings and reddish-brown scales. It stood on its thick hind feet and had front claws that looked tiny in comparison. For now, it stood in place unmoving, its head drooping slightly. Up until now, the Gamers had killed a total of seventy-five Rank A dungeon bosses, fighting every other variety of boss monster. This, however, was their first time encountering a dragon.

So, we finally got to meet one. I guess that makes the probability of spawning a dragon somewhere between two and one percent.

According to records, dragons possessed significantly higher Attack and Defense than any of the other types of Rank A dungeon bosses. There were accounts of these monsters thoroughly decimating parties filled with experienced adventurers.

“How should we do this, Allen?” Krena asked. It was now second nature for the party to turn to Allen for instruction whenever they encountered something new.

“This is the most powerful boss that can spawn, so I’ll make the first attack. We’ll leave four Steelys on standby to protect against AoE breath attacks.”

The party had come up with multiple strategies for fighting dungeon bosses and was still in the process of testing out new ones in the never-ending search for ever-greater efficiency. As such, they always made a conscious effort not to only use the same one, instead adopting different tactics to suit differing situations. Of all the strategies in their arsenal, the ones that ended fights fastest involved Allen dealing the first attack.

“All right, start things off with a bang,” Dogora said with a grin before getting into position like everyone else, ax in hand.

The first order of business was to gauge how powerful this dragon was. This time, the party was going with a defensive formation that made the most of Stone Cs. Allen’s grimoire flipped furiously as he Unsummoned all three Summons Squads and altered his distribution of cards.

“All right, let’s do this.”

All five Bird Cs they were riding activated their Awakened Ability. As usual, from front to back, it was Krena and Dogora together as the vanguard in the front, Allen in the middle, then Cecil and Keel together bringing up the rear providing support.

The five of them inched forward cautiously. The timing of the first attack was very important.

"Go, Wally Bombers!"

Ten Stone Es materialized in a tight circle around the dragon and exploded in one massive boom. A while back, Allen had stopped calling this maneuver "Meteor," since it was a part of the name of Cecil's Extra Skill. He was not someone who stole or appropriated from other people.

From within the billowing cloud of smoke, the dragon slowly reared its nearly ten-meter-long body to its full height. It roared angrily, "What do you think you're doing?!"

Cecil's eyes widened with surprise. "It talked!"

The five teenagers stopped their advance to observe their opponent. Soon, the smoke cleared away, revealing the dragon glaring their way.

"A measly five humans? And you think you can beat *me*? Hah! I've never seen a funnier joke! All this time, you've had it easy not encountering me, but now your luck's run out. Ignorance truly is a sin. Out of respect for that hubris of yours, I shall grant you an agonizing death squirming in my hellish fl—"

"Wallys, Explode."

Before it finished its speech, another ten Stone Es appeared in a circle around the dragon and exploded once more. Right after the first round, Allen had already started making replacement Stone E cards.

Having been interrupted mid-speech, the dragon now looked even more furious than before. "How... How *dare* you! None of you are leaving here *aliiive!*"

"Uh, now it's angry at *all* of us, isn't it?" Cecil's laser stare bore holes into Allen's back.

"Well, y'know...collective responsibility and all that, right?"

Combat in this world was not turn-based. If one side did nothing during a fight, the other side could simply whale on the first using whatever skills were at their disposal. In fact, if one side was fast enough, they could get in more attacks within the same period of time. The dragon choosing to stay still and deliver a monologue was one example of this.

I hope that whittled down a significant chunk of its HP.

Since the group had no idea how powerful the dragon was, they had no choice but to focus solely on dealing damage. The damage dealt by Summons with attack-oriented Awakened Abilities received a significant boost now that Allen had reached Strengthening Lvl. 7—with Stone E and its Explode being one such example.

The enraged monster bared its ferocious teeth and barreled toward the party.

“Krena, let’s get in there!” Dogora shouted. “Maintain formation!”

“Okay, let’s go!” Krena replied.

The two tightened their grips on their weapons and charged forward, not cowed by the dragon in the slightest. In the next instant, both sides clashed. Krena landed the first blow, slamming her greatsword into the dragon’s foot with every ounce of her strength. However, her blade barely broke the skin, despite her having 3,000 Attack. Dogora’s attacks did not seem to do any serious damage either.

Through masterful maneuvering of their Bird Cs, Krena and Dogora desperately dodged the barrage of attacks from the dragon’s front claws, jaws, and tail. While doing so, they continued piling on the attacks.

Oof, the two are having trouble hurting it. By the looks of things, it doesn’t just have high Defense; it’s definitely also resistant to physical damage.

How much damage someone could deal to a target was generally affected by four main factors: the attacker’s weapon, the attacker’s skill levels and stats, additional stat boosts from items such as rings, and the defender’s Endurance stat. At times, however, there were more forces at play. Some beings had resistance against physical attacks, with Spirit C being a good example. Allen suspected that the dragon did as well, meaning that what little damage it would normally have taken with its high Endurance was now almost completely nullified.

Several minutes into the fight, Allen noticed a red glow forming deep within the dragon’s throat and climbing up to its mouth. The next moment, the beast raised its head high and reared back.

“Breath attack incoming!!!” Allen roared.

Immediately, two Stone Cs stepped forward to protect Cecil and Keel as the other two Summons used their Awakened Ability, Sacrifice, to cover the entire party. When this Ability was activated, the Summon took on all of the damage for every party member within range until its HP ran out. How much damage it suffered was based on the Stone C’s own Endurance stat, not that of the targets it was protecting.

The dragon’s mouth gleamed with bright light, then an incredible heat assaulted Allen’s group.

Ugh, this attack is lasting so long.

A torrent of fire enveloped Krena, Dogora, and Allen, which meant that the two Stone Cs using Sacrifice had to endure the damage that three people would have suffered. They did not last long, quickly disappearing into glowing bubbles and therefore forcing Allen to immediately Summon two more to take their place before making replacement cards.

The instant the dragon’s breath fizzled out, Krena and Dogora resumed their assault.

“INSOLEEEEEENCE!!!”

Once again, the dragon’s throat began to glow. Everyone braced themselves for another breath attack, but it did not come.

Wait, is it...?

“Oh no! It’s building up to a big one!”

Some monsters were intelligent enough to gather their strength for an exceptionally powerful attack. Naturally, these were far more devastating than regular moves. Krena and Dogora continued doing as much damage as they could, but the dragon was clearly not going to fall before its next attack was ready.

Soon, the charged-up breath attack burst forth in a blinding stream of destruction, only this time broader and farther than before. The newly Summoned Stone Cs as well as the ones protecting Cecil and Keel all disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Right after the breath let up, the dragon’s throat started glowing once more. The monster had clearly figured out that this would be the effective way to defeat Allen’s party. The third breath attack, in all its punishing grandeur, arrived all too soon.

Allen could not create new Stone Cs in time. He was barely able to keep Cecil and Keel protected, as they would likely die immediately if they took this attack head-on. That was how formidable it was.

That left Krena, Dogora, and Allen exposed, and they paid for it as the torrent of flames washed over them and sent them flying. The Bird Cs that they were riding collapsed into glowing bubbles and disappeared underneath their riders. Maria, who had been floating in midair, rushed over in a fluster to heal the party up with recovery items.

It did not take long for the dragon to build up for another breath.

Ugh, I can’t make Steelys fast enough.

“Allen, another breath attack is coming! What’re we going to do?!” Cecil cried out.

“Everyone, line up!” Allen replied in the form of a command. “This is gonna be a drawn-out fight!”

“Okay,” Dogora nodded. “Otherwise we’re gonna get wiped out.”

Based on what they now knew about the range, strength, and timing of the dragon’s breath attacks, Allen had concluded that a full-on assault was a bad idea. They needed to work out a different tactic. However, while Dogora had acknowledged the order, Krena simply stood in place, her sword arm hanging limply at her side.

“Krena! Fall back!” Allen repeated, but then noticed his companion’s blank stare. “Krena?”

Wait, no, I’ve seen this somewhere bef— Ah, is she?!

Suddenly, Krena let out a loud cry, and a heat haze burst out and surrounded her body. The next moment, she was charging forward at an impossible speed.

The dragon set its sights on the girl and let loose a particularly gigantic breath attack that instantly swallowed her up in blinding, scorching flames.

“ROOOOAAAARRRRR!!!”

“*KRENA!!!*” Just as Allen was about to rush forward with a recovery item in hand, however, he witnessed a greatsword severing one of the dragon’s claws.

Krena had charged into the flames and come out the other side. Her movements were now a far cry from mere moments prior. The dragon shrieked with pain and bled profusely as her tiny figure ran circles around it, launching a frenzied assault.

There was no telling how long Krena could remain in this state. Allen took advantage of this time to reconfigure the party’s formation and create as many Summons as possible.

Can we keep this up and end the fight in one push? Krena’s stats are now through the roof. Whoa, her HP is recovering at a rate of one percent per second!

Krena’s Status was showing numbers higher than anything Allen had seen before. The burns on her body from the dragon’s breath attack she had taken were also healing at a visible pace.

[redacted]

```
Name: Krena (Massive HP Regeneration)
Age: 13
Class: Sword Lord
Level: 58
HP: 2,360 + 3,900
MP: 922 + 3,000
Attack: 2,360 + 3,900
Endurance: 1,654 + 3,900
Agility: 1,594 + 3,900
Intelligence: 942 + 3,000
Luck: 1,155 + 3,000
Skills: Sword Lord {5}, Slash {5}, Flying Slash {5}, Pyroblast {5}, Thunderous Sword {5}, Toughness {1}, Sword Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Limit Break
```

[redacted]

“YOU LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT!!!”

The dragon’s composed and pompous manner of speaking was quickly devolving into little more than vulgar insults. It was absolutely consumed with rage. Deep gashes marred its body from head to toe, and they bled profusely. Its thick tail managed to slam squarely into Krena and smashed her against a far wall, but she immediately got back to her feet and started running back at the beast.

The dragon’s throat began to emit the brightest glow of the whole fight thus far. The monster apparently thought it had bought itself enough time when it had batted Krena away, but it was dead wrong. Before it could finish charging up its attack, her greatsword plunged into the glowing part of its throat.

“YAAAAAAH!!!”

“ROOOAAAARRRR!!!”

Flames burst from the throat like a bomb detonating, enveloping the dragon. Its massive body fell over, crashing to the ground with a shuddering boom.

`<You have defeated 1 heavy dragon. You have earned 1,600,000 XP.>`

Damn, Krena just took out a dragon! And that amount of XP—since we got 1.6 million fighting it as a group of five, that means someone soloing it would get 2 million. That’s two to three times the amount that the other Rank A dungeon bosses give.

The next moment, the dragon was reduced to nothing but a Rank A magic stone.

“Krena, you all right?” Allen asked as he and the rest of the party ran up to Krena, who was no longer enveloped in an aura.

“Yep! I beat the dragon! Yaaayyy!”

Seriously, Extra Skills are way too overpowered.

Allen recalled the time when Krena had beaten up Vice-Captain Leibrand when she was five years old. Now that Allen fully understood what had happened back then, he could not help but feel sorry for the man.

Effect of Krena’s Extra Skill “Limit Break”

- Recovers HP at 1%/second
- All stats +3,000

“WHOOOOO! It’s a gold chest!!!” Keel shouted, jolting Allen away from his thoughts.

Everyone cheered at getting their first-ever gold chest. It glittered even more magnificently than the silver chests did. Krena opened it, revealing a single ring resting inside.

“It’s a ring!” she exclaimed. “Is it an MP Recovery Ring?!”

HERE WE GOOOO! IT’S A RING! This has got to be an MP Recovery Ring. It’s gotta be!

Allen was beside himself with excitement. Because Krena had just used up a lot of MP, he asked her to put it on. He checked his grimoire, but her MP did not go up.

Noticing his crestfallen look, Krena asked, “Did it not work, Allen?”

“This is...not an MP Recovery Ring, apparently.” Despite feeling disappointed, however, Allen was not one to stop testing things out. “Um, Dogora, you try putting it on.”

“’Kay.” Dogora obliged. Immediately his HP began recovering at one percent per tick. Before long, he was back to full health.

“This is an HP Recovery Ring,” Allen declared, albeit regretfully. *Grrr, so close!*

“I’m sorry,” Cecil said out of sympathy. “But hey, this is a good thing. Now you know you can keep hoping.”

If an HP Recovery Ring could drop, then so could an MP Recovery Ring. Allen gathered himself and renewed his determination to keep challenging the dungeons.

□ □ □

Roughly three months had passed since the No-life Gamers had cleared their second Rank A dungeon, and March was now coming to its end. When thinking about how they had come to this city around the same time last year, time truly seemed to have passed in a flash. It would not be not long before they would become second-year students.

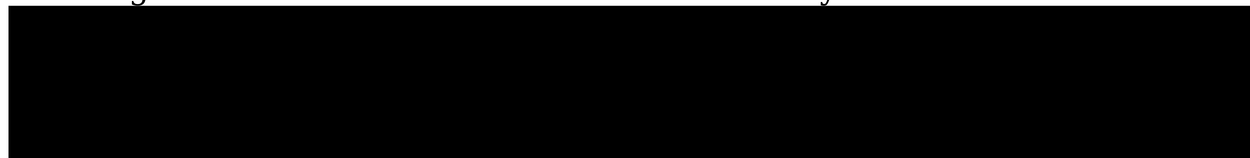
The party was currently deep inside the third Rank A dungeon they were challenging. They had just finished off a group of Rank B monsters that had attacked them when Krena felt something.

“Oh, it went up.”

“Your level?”

I see. So even Krena’s finally hit the level cap. That makes all four of them, then.

Krena had reached Lvl. 60. Her stats had gone up, but now her Status in Allen’s grimoire looked different from how it always had.



Name: Krena
Age: 13
Class: Sword Lord
Level: 60
HP: 2,440 + 1,800
MP: 954
Attack: 2,440 + 1,800
Endurance: 1,712 + 1,800
Agility: 1,648 + 1,800
Intelligence: 974
Luck: 1,195
Skills: Sword Lord {6}, Slash {6}, Flying Slash {6}, Pyroblast {6}, Thunderous Sword {6}, Toughness {2}, Sword Mastery {6}
Extra Skill: Limit BreakName: Cecil Granvelle
Age: 13
Class: Wizardess
Level: 60
HP: 1,028
MP: 1,736 + 1,200
Attack: 659

Endurance: 842
Agility: 1,019 + 1,200
Intelligence: 2,390 + 1,200
Luck: 960
Skills: Wizardry {6}, Fire {6}, Earth {6}, Wind {6}, Water {6}, Wisdom {2}, Sparring {3}
Extra Skill: Petit MeteorName: Dogora
Age: 13
Class: Ax User
Level: 60
HP: 1,322 + 600
MP: 716
Attack: 1,741 + 600
Endurance: 1,145
Agility: 724
Intelligence: 482
Luck: 783
Skills: War Ax {6}, Full Might {6}, Flying Hatchet {6}, Explosive Strike {6}, Avalanche Smash {6}, Fighting Spirit {2}, Ax Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Heart and SoulName: Keel
Age: 13
Class: Cleric
Level: 60
HP: 787
MP: 1,499 + 600
Attack: 598
Endurance: 841
Agility: 959
Intelligence: 1,321 + 600
Luck: 1,203
Skills: Cleric {6}, Healing {6}, Solidity {6}, Cure {6}, Magic Wall {6}, Faith {2}, Sword Mastery {3}
Extra Skill: Drops of God

[redacted]

The “XP” and “Skill Levels” fields had disappeared, indicating that max level was 60, and max skill level was 6.

Just like the others, this Rank A dungeon was large and expansive, so the party had once again decided to look for a small room to spend the night in. Thankfully, there was still a bit more of spring break left, and they had planned to make the most of it.

When it came to setting up camp and cooking, everyone helped out. However, because none of them really had much experience doing chores, their meals were always rather simple. It was essentially just meat cut into

cubes, skewered and grilled over a fire, then seasoned with a bit of salt and other condiments. The firewood that they used for the fire came from Allen’s Storage, which also contained dozens of barrels smaller than thirty centimeters across filled with drinks. Over the course of the past year, the supplies that he brought along for camping had gotten a lot more substantial.

“So…does this really mean we can’t get any stronger?” Dogora asked while biting into a juicy piece of meat. Everyone else looked somewhat shocked about this fact as well.

Allen shook his head. “‘Can’t get any stronger’ is not quite right. More accurately, your base and skill levels have maxed out and can’t go any higher.”

“But that’s the same thing.” Making a confused face, Dogora picked up a slice of bread that had been warming by the fire and began tearing into it.

Yeah, they’ve really hit the level cap. This happened a lot faster than I’d expected.

The term “level cap” referred to the upper limit of how high someone’s base or skill levels could go. Every single game Allen had played in his previous life had level caps. Some were only 50, whereas some went all the way up to 999. From what he remembered, he had maxed out every single character he played.

The question, however, was why the No-life Gamers reached this level cap within a single year.

Then again, the answer’s pretty clear. It’s definitely related to the Demon Lord raising the ranks of all the monsters in the world.

Ever since he was a young child, Allen had always thought that the amount of XP monsters in this world gave was quite high. In all likelihood, since all monsters had gone up a rank in this world—including the ones in dungeons—this meant that the XP they awarded had also gone up.

- Horned rabbit (Rank E): 1 XP → 10 XP
- Goblin (Rank D): 20 XP → 200 XP
- Great boar (Rank C): 100 XP → 1,000 XP
- Orc king (Rank B): 2,500 XP → 25,000 XP
- Great warrior (Rank A): 60,000 XP → 600,000 XP

Since the amount of XP received was ten times what it was before, people’s levels now went up ten times faster.

“Well, it’s true that now all of your active skills have reached Lvl. 6, so now they’ve gotten really powerful,” Allen said. “However, everyone’s still got a long way to go.”

“We do?”

I was pretty surprised when everyone got another boost to their stats when their class skill reached Lvl. 6. My Summoning is also Lvl. 6, but

Krena's stat-boosting skill gives her 1,200 more stat points total than all my cards give me. Conversely, she has two fewer skills than I do.

- One star (Ax User, Cleric): +600 to 2 skills for a total of +1,200 stat points
- Two stars (Wizardess): +1,200 to 3 skills for a total of +3,600 stat points
- Three stars (Sword Lord): +1,800 to 4 skills for a total of +7,200 stat points
- Eight stars (Summoner): +6,000 stat points in total

As it turned out, those in Normal Mode received stat buffs twice; once when their class skill reached Lvl. 3, and again at Lvl. 6. The buff amount depended on their class rarity, but it was still significant, thanks to the double buff. However, as someone whose class skill was Lvl. 6 as well, Allen could not help but feel that the number of skills his companions possessed was on the low side, especially given that one slot was used up with a stat-booster. Unlike Allen, they did not receive new skills every time their class skill leveled up.

Ever since the first member of the No-life Gamers had reached the level cap, Allen had been racking his brains for what direction they should take going forward. He had come up with a few ideas.

- Learn how to use their Extra Skills at will
- Collect stat-boosting rings from gold treasure chests
- Obtain orichalcum weapons and armor

"First, let's get to the point where everyone can use their Extra Skill at will."

Since they were going to begin their second year at school next month, the idea was to ask their instructors for guidance on this aspect.

There was something else the party needed to do. Some of them were still wearing equipment they had picked up from wooden chests, but because silver chests appeared around one-tenth of the time, they were pretty sure they could outfit everyone in silver-chest gear with half a year of fighting Rank A bosses every day.

After the one gold chest dropped by the dragon in January, the party had not seen another one since. The HP Recovery Ring from that time was now being worn by Keel. Monsters ranked B and higher were often intelligent enough to go after the healer first. Because Keel had only a fraction of Dogora's HP, he would die in no time at all if several monsters were to gang up on him. When they took his Status and other equipment into consideration, the party had concluded that he had the highest chance of dying and agreed to give him the ring.

“And we’re aiming for another gold chest, right?” Cecil asked. “The second one just isn’t showing up at all.”

“Of course we’ll be hunting for gold chests. However, if they’re really this rare, then we might be better off buying the items we want at the Auction.”

Time was ticking down before the No-life Gamers would be heading to the battlefield. The rings that came in silver chests gave better buffs than those from wooden chests, so it made sense to assume that any rings found in gold chests would be even better. However, if gold chests would only appear a handful of times a year, then Allen was thinking they might as well check the Auction for gold-chest items that other people had found and put up for sale.

Krena, who had taken it the hardest when she had learned that she could no longer gain levels, joined in the conversation with food still in her mouth. “That leaves orichalcum weapons!”

“But Krena, orichalcum stuff doesn’t appear at the Auction, and even the Adventurer’s Guild couldn’t tell us how to get them,” Keel pointed out. “All they said was we *might* get them from the dungeons.”

“Oh right, they did say that.” Krena nodded.

Unlike the rings that came from gold chests, no one seemed to have a clue where or how to get orichalcum weapons. The staff at the Guild had hesitantly said that it was possible gold chests in a Rank A dungeon might drop them, but there was nothing to back up that theory. In the first place, there was very little information about gold chests due to their rarity. For all the Gamers knew, they might have to go all the way to the Rank S dungeon to find any orichalcum.

“In any case, we’ve got to explore every last possibility there is to get stronger,” Allen concluded. “Even if it’s nothing but a rumor, we’ll track it down. We might even encounter incredible items beyond orichalcum and rings.”

“Maybe,” Cecil said, doubtful, “but with how desperate everyone has been to get stronger since the Demon Lord appeared, don’t you think they’d have found everything already?”

“No, I’m sure there are still things left to discover out there. Like the Rank S dungeon; it supposedly exists, but there’s almost no information about it, meaning we have to go check it out ourselves. Maybe there’s some rich collector out there who possesses something incredible but doesn’t even know it. It’s important to keep our mind and ears open.”

The process of gathering information was part of the thrill of climbing to the top. At times, legend and rumor were rooted in truth. No matter what the scoop, if there was even the slightest possibility that it could lead to something crucial, then Allen was determined to pursue it to the end.

Maybe we should check the Academy library for legends too. In any case, I’ve got to seriously brainstorm ways to make everyone stronger.

That’s why I was reincarnated with memories of my previous life intact, after all.

And so the No-life Gamers, after having reached the level cap within a year, found themselves having to get creative with their progression going forward.

Chapter 13: Transfer Students

April rolled around, and Allen and his friends became second-year students. Today marked the start of the new academic year for the 2,600 students who had cleared their summer break assignment the previous year.

At this particular school, students in different grades attended classes in separate buildings, each with their own station along the magic train route. Allen’s group made their commute to their new school building and walked into the room with the same number as their previous classroom.

There were already many familiar faces in the classroom. Although it was a new school year, the class rosters had not been shuffled. The idea was that, for three years, the students would share the same classes and same room number, graduate as a group, then fight together on the battlefield.

When Allen headed for his usual seat, he found Rifol already in the seat in front, just like the year before.

“Morning, Allen.”

“Hey, morning, Rifol. Been a while.”

While settling in, Allen took a look around the room. There were thirty seats just as before, but only twenty-seven students. The missing three had failed to clear their summer break assignment and thus had been expelled.

“By the way, do you have any intel on who’s coming?”

“For once, I’m as in the dark as you are,” Rifol replied.

Well, since there are three seats, I guess we can at least figure that there’ll be three transfer students, right?

Before spring break, Allen had learned from Rifol that several transfer students would be joining their class. There was a reason for this transfer program. Specifically, in the second semester of this school year—meaning, after summer break—the second-year class would be learning Demon Lord history. Why after summer break? Because the second-year summer break assignment was the reason behind the majority of dropouts, and there was no need for dropouts to know the truth.

In this kingdom, information about the Demon Lord was strictly controlled. After all, the Demon Lord was a problem far beyond what Ratash could deal with on its own. Those in power had concluded that no good would come from allowing the general populace to know the truth of the world, and that it could even lead to a great deal of harm, not least destabilizing the economy and fostering discontent toward the powers that be.

Curriculum Leading Up to the Demon Lord History Class

- Year 1, before summer: History and geography of Ratash

- Year 1, after summer: History and geography of the other countries of the Central Continent
- Year 2, before summer: Geography of the world
- Year 2, after summer: Demon Lord history

Information was nowhere near as widely available as it had been in Allen’s previous life. There were magic tools for communicating over long distances, but they were accessible only to a small handful of people. Among the student body were mere commoners and serfs born in remote villages; it was possible they might not even believe the Demon Lord history they were to be taught. At the very least, their parents would have never mentioned anything of the sort. Each person had a limit to what they could believe. However, for the sake of the third-year curriculum—and for their approaching time on the battlefield—the students needed to be convinced of the truth regarding the rest of the world and the Demon Lord. And there was one particular way to do so.

“All right, all right! Seats, everyone!”

Carlova, the class’s homeroom teacher, lumbered into the classroom, wearing clothes that looked one size too small for him and seemed at constant risk of bursting due to his bulging muscles. Three others followed behind him and lined up in front of the lectern: one male elf, one female elf, and one female dwarf.

“WHOOOAAAA!”

The students suddenly let out a loud cheer. Their reactions to the transfer students varied greatly, from “They really exist!” to “Huh? Why do they have long ears?” and everything in between. Those who did not know that new students were transferring in were even more surprised at the visible racial characteristics.

“Pipe down, you lot! Do you want me to introduce them or not?!” Carlova’s hand shot forward, and, like a vise, started squeezing the face of one of the students in the front who had been kicking up a fuss like a carp that had just been fed. Cecil sometimes performed the same move on Allen too, and despite appearances, it actually hurt quite a bit.

When the class settled back down, Carlova began introducing the three newcomers. They had come from elven and dwarven countries respectively located on the continents to the northeast and northwest of the Central Continent. He told the class that they would be learning about these countries later on.

The reactions between those who’ve seen elves and dwarves before and those who haven’t is pretty disparate. Of course, I doubt their transferring here was just to convince the students of the existence of other races. Speaking of which, the headmaster is a high elf too, though I almost never see any sign of him.

“All right, go on and introduce yourselves.”

Upon being prompted, the female elf with long silver hair, golden eyes, and porcelain skin nodded gracefully and seemed to float forward. "My fellow classmates, it's my pleasure making your acquaintance. My name is Sophialohne, and I'm from the elven country of Rohzenheim. Please call me Sophie. I look forward to my time with all of you!"

Some of the students were so charmed by her voice that they momentarily forgot to breathe. For some reason, the elf next to her looked very disgruntled at this.

Hm? Why's she looking at me? What, you want a staring contest?

After introducing herself, the girl turned to stare at Allen. Noticing this, he decided to give her the stink eye in return.

Disregarding the exchange taking place between Allen and Sophie, the male elf stepped forward. "I'm Volmaar. I am here to guard Her Highness *Princess* Sophialohne—she who is next in line to the throne of Rohzenheim and a high elf."

As it turned out, Sophie was no ordinary elf, but one of the high elves. Upon hearing that she was a princess, the students turned to look at her again, and she smiled back in response. The annoyance on Volmaar's face grew deeper.

Sophie has silver hair, but Volmaar has gray hair. Is that how you differentiate between normal elves and high elves?

The homeroom teacher smiled wryly at Volmaar's attitude, scratching the back of his head. Then he urged the dwarf girl to proceed with her self-introduction.

"What's up! Ya boy hails from the Empire of Baukis. Name's Meruru. Let's all be friends!"

"Ya boy"? Well, she seems nice and energetic.

Meruru had drooping eyes, tanned skin, and light green hair in a bob cut, and she was a head shorter than Allen. For a split second, Allen thought he had gotten her gender wrong due to the way she referred to herself, but her appearance made it clear she was a girl.

When the three newcomers had finished introducing themselves, the rest of the class looked at Carlova expectantly. He suddenly looked toward the back corner next to the windows.

"Allen."

"Yes, sir?" Allen replied, his voice breaking a little from surprise.

"Your group only has five people at the moment, right? Can you look after these three?"

Allen had a rather central position in this class and was on good terms with other relatively influential students such as Uster and Rifol. Carlova figured that the boy could be entrusted with the three transfer students.

I don't mind helping them out, but how far does "looking after" entail? Do I just show them around the school building? I mean, it's my first day in this building too. And Carlova did mention my group having five people. Did

he mean our party? Are these three gonna be staying with us all the way to the battlefield? Or do we only have to take them through the dungeons?

Cecil interrupted Allen's thoughts from the seat behind his. "What're we going to do, Allen? Are you going to say yes?" She knew that he was someone who would bluntly turn down anything he had no desire to do.

With Krena also turning his way with an inquisitive look from her seat next to his, Allen replied, "Well...why not? At least, let's first have lunch with them and ask them what *they* want to do."

Even as Allen was conversing with his companions, the elven girl's golden eyes were trained on him. This made him question whether he had any prior elven acquaintances, but he was pretty sure he had never met any other elves aside from the headmaster.

"All right, let's do that," Cecil said in agreement.

Seeing that Allen did not refuse, Carlova told the transfer students to take their seats and to direct any questions they may have to Allen afterward.

Even if we do have to take them to the dungeons, it's not like it'll affect the amount of XP we each get. Besides, now that everyone else has reached the level cap, I'm the only one who still needs XP in the first place.

After last year's summer break, one of their classes had covered the distribution of XP for people fighting together in groups.

XP Gained When Fighting in a Group

- 1 person (solo): 100%
- 2 to 8 people: 80%
- 9 to 16 people: 60%
- 17 to 48 people: 40%
- 49 to 252 people: 20%
- Over 253 people: 10%

Allen was of the opinion that the conditions for gaining XP were very lenient. After all, someone simply had to be a part of a fight to gain XP, even if they did not contribute in any tangible way. This included, for example, healers on standby waiting to cast their spells, members of a backup force waiting to step up in case the front line broke, and members of a supply team whose only job would be to carry replacement weapons and ammunition. Even if a fight ended with those in such positions not having cast a single spell or dealt a single attack, they would still be considered eligible for XP.

Conversely, someone tagging along solely to observe—for example, as a learning opportunity—would not gain any XP. When Allen first heard this, he had thought, *What, so it's just a matter of having the right mindset?*

Once the transfer students had taken their seats, Carlova continued with the homeroom announcements. "Since we're at it, I'll go ahead and tell y'all

about your assignments for this year. Yep, plural—there are two. Just like last year, if you can't clear 'em, you're expelled. Take them seriously."

To simplify his following explanation, their first task would be to clear a Rank B dungeon by the end of summer break with a party of no more than sixteen people; the second task would be to learn how to activate each of their skills before the end of spring break. With regard to the latter, he told them that their afternoon classes would begin covering how to do so and that they should listen carefully in class.

Soon it was lunchtime, and Allen invited the transfer students to eat with his group. He brought them to the cafeteria for second-year students close to their school building. There, clusters of students could be found also grouped around other elves and dwarves that had likely transferred into their respective classes. Everyone had come up with the same idea of getting to know each other over food.

Allen's group introduced themselves and shared their daily routine of visiting the dungeons every day. Wanting to see whether he could accommodate the demands of these newcomers that he had been tasked with looking after, Allen asked them what they wanted to do.

Before he even finished asking his question, Sophie immediately replied, "I want to join you on the dungeon runs too!" She seemed so eager that Allen was more than a little taken aback. Volmaar, her guard, remained silent, indicating that he was willing to go along with whatever his charge chose to do.

When it was her turn to speak, Meruru said, "I also wanna hit up the dungeons myself. I'd like to send money home to my family."

Naturally, talk then turned to the newcomers' Talents. Sophie was a Spirit Mage, able to provide both healing and buffs. Volmaar was an Archer and could deal damage from long distances. These two additions would greatly expand the strategies available to the party.

Meruru's Talent, however, was a bit of a curveball. Its name was Talos General, and it was so rare that only one in ten million people had it. After Allen heard what it did, he asked her to join the No-life Gamers without a second thought.

Then the topic of living quarters came up.

The No-life Gamers' base was currently occupied only by the five core members and Keel's family. As such, there were still plenty of spare rooms. When she heard this, Sophie immediately said, "Let us live with you!" with the same eagerness as before, leading Allen to wonder if all elves spoke with such intensity. And since Sophie and Volmaar were going to live at the base, Meruru decided to follow suit.

Sophie had two attendants, but again, there was more than enough space. Allen recalled that it was generally not allowed to bring one's attendants to the school lodgings—attendants who were not enrolled as students, that was—but clearly an exception had been made for this particular member of foreign superpower royalty. Before long, lunch came

to an end with Allen and his friends agreeing to help their three new companions move in on their next day off.

When afternoon classes also ended, Carlova told the Gamers that the headmaster wanted to have a chat with them about the transfer students, so they headed to his office. There, he stressed over and over for them to take especially good care of Sophie. The princess was apparently much higher in status than the headmaster. Rohzenheim worshipped the Sovereign of Spirits, with the queen being the one who actually governed the country. Sophie possessed the right of succession, which the headmaster did not, despite being a fellow high elf.

“As someone born into the royal family but with no right to succession, being the headmaster of a small country’s Academy City is the most I can do,” the headmaster said in a self-deprecating way.

I see, so Rohzenheim is a matriarchy.

Four days of school passed, and the weekend arrived. The whole party worked together to carry over their three new friends’ luggage and help them settle into the base. The newcomers had mostly been using whatever the school lodgings came furnished with, so they actually did not have too many belongings. Thanks to this, a single round trip with a carriage proved enough. Krena and Cecil took the magic train back ahead of the rest to buy supplies for the welcome party at night.

Once everything was loaded, the carriage set off, with Allen mulling over in shock how much the carriage ride cost compared to the magic train. Before long, the vehicle parked in front of the base. Krena and Cecil came out in greeting, followed by a Spirit C.

“Welcome home, master,” Maria said.

Allen nodded. “We’re back.” Although he was entirely used to seeing Maria phase through walls by now, a small part of him always wondered if their neighbors thought their place was haunted.

Allen’s familiarity did not extend to Sophie, of course. With eyes wide as saucers, she asked, “Wh-What is that?”

Allen promised to explain later and prompted everyone to start moving the luggage inside. Soon, everything had been dropped off in each person’s room.

The Carnel servants were taken aback by the appearances of the new inhabitants, but they got over it in no time, thanks to having been trained to adapt to strange goings-on from staying with the Gamers. Elves and dwarves were far less jarring than a flying ghost doll, after all.

What a big group we’ve become. I’m glad we chose this twenty-person house.

In addition to the five No-life Gamers, there was Nina, the six House Carnel servants, Sophie, Volmaar, Meruru, Sophie’s two attendants, and the one lady-in-waiting dispatched by Viscount Granvelle. All together, there were now eighteen people living in this base.

Last October, the viscount had sent the lady-in-waiting over to look after Cecil, saying it was far from ideal leaving her entirely in the care of the Carnel servants. Allen accepted this, understanding that the need for this sort of arrangement was just one of the considerations that came with being a noble. Naturally, the viscount was the one paying the servant's salary.

While the new inhabitants were unpacking, Allen and his friends were cooking up a storm for the welcome party. Thanks to the Carnel servants, the menu was significantly more extravagant than what had been served at Keel's party. The large table was soon covered with the dishes that everyone had worked so hard on, bringing the usual hungry sparkle in Krena's eyes up another dazzling notch. When everyone sat down to eat, however, the two elven attendants remained standing.

"Come join us," Allen said, realizing that he had yet to learn their names.

"No, we are fine, thank you," they both replied in the same reserved tone.

Whoa, they spoke in perfect unison. Now that I take a better look, they have the exact same face. Are they twins?

"No, no," Allen insisted, "the rule here at this Academy is that everyone, from serfs to royalty, has to treat each other as equals, regardless of status. This party is partly to welcome *you* too. Let's all enjoy it together."

Honestly, Allen was not normally such a stickler for the rules himself. All he really wanted was for the whole group to eat together.

"Since Lord Allen is insisting, sit down," Sophie ordered. Again, she had spoken so quickly she seemed on the verge of cutting Allen off. And also, for some reason, she was addressing him as "Lord."

"U-Understood, Your Highness," the two replied, obliging.

Once they took their seats, Allen stood up to give a simple toast. "Today, five new friends have joined us here at the home base. Let's make them feel welcome. Here's to the future!"

"Thanks for having us!" Meruru replied cheerfully.

Everyone greeted and toasted each other in turn. As Krena shot her hands toward the food like a dog just released after being told to "wait," the four elves clasped their hands together and started murmuring.

When they were finished, Allen asked Sophie, "Were you praying to the Sovereign of Spirits?"

She nodded. "We are thankful to Lord Rohzen for all that we have."

Rohzen, the Sovereign of Spirits, was contracted to the elven queen, and it was through that contract that he provided all elves with Spirit Magic. If not for this power, the elves might very well have been wiped out by the Demon Lord Army long ago.

I guess it only makes sense that different countries and races come with their own distinct cultures.

When Allen turned to look at Meruru, however, she was already digging into her food without having said grace.

"Do dwarves not pray?" he asked curiously.

“Nah! Lord Dygragni said we don’t need to.”

“Who’s that?” Never heard that name before. Is he someone famous in Baukis?

“Lord Dygragni’s other name is Dungeon Master. He’s who we worship. He’s apparently been real happy these days ’cuz he’s getting close to becoming a Minor Deity.”

“Dungeon Master? Minor Deity?”

Seeing Allen’s confused face, Meruru explained that Dygragni controlled all the dungeons in the world—thus his name as Dungeon Master—and was the one who created the model that all magic tools were based on. The conveniences of dwarven technology, ranging from magic ships and magic trains to the simplest illumination tool, were all created by recreating and building off of Dygragni’s work. Consequently, many dwarves worshipped him as a god.

Ah, so the dungeon cubes also count as magic tools. They do seem kind of artificial and robotic.

Allen felt his world expanding with the addition of his new companions, who brought with them their dramatically different lifestyles and worldviews.

“What did you mean by ‘becoming a Minor Deity’?” Cecil asked, joining the conversation.

“Huh? That’s... How do I, hm...”

Seeing Meruru struggling for an answer, Sophie cut in. “Deities are born from people’s prayers.” She went on to explain that Rohzen had also started out as a normal spirit, but thanks to the elves relying on him and constantly praying to him, he became a Minor Deity with the title “Sovereign of Spirits.” If the elves continued praying to him, he would eventually ascend to a full deity. All elves shared the wish in helping Rohzen accomplish this. The same was true for Dygragni, who would also one day become a Minor Deity with enough prayers from the dwarves.

“Wow, I never imagined how different other countries could be,” Keel marveled out loud. Just like Allen, he was also feeling like his horizons were being broadened.

“Talk of the Dungeon Master is good and all, but what’re we gonna do about our own dungeon progress?” Dogora asked, holding a large hunk of meat in one hand. “We haven’t talked about it yet, right? Do we start all over from Rank B?”

It was true that, although it had been decided that Sophie, Volmaar, and Meruru would be joining the No-life Gamers, the specific details of what that would entail had not been hashed out yet. When asked about their progress, they had revealed that they had finished the requisite number of Rank C dungeons but had yet to challenge a Rank B one.

Currently, Allen’s group was in the middle of going through their fourth Rank A dungeon. If they could finish one more after that, they would gain an invitation to the world’s one and only Rank S dungeon.

As everyone’s stares converged on him, Allen replied, “I’m thinking of both continuing our Rank A dungeon *and* helping Sophie and the others with their Rank B dungeons at the same time.”

Dogora frowned in puzzlement. “Huh? What d’ya mean?”

In contrast, a look of understanding dawned on Cecil’s face. “You mean to split the party up.”

“That’s right.” Allen nodded.

He then explained that, of the two days each weekend, he and Dogora would spend one and a half accompanying Sophie’s group. During that time, Krena, Cecil, and Keel were to continue progressing through the Rank A dungeon.

Even before today, Allen had already put a lot of thought into the possibility of new members joining the party. After all, there were many roles that their party setup lacked. Any time someone new joined, they would face the same issue they did now. So, in order to help newcomers catch up, Allen had drawn up meticulous maps in his grimoire of all the dungeons his party had gone through. In short, their current situation had been within his expectations.

This arrangement did mean, however, that his Summons were going to be mobilized pretty much down to the last card slot, spread out between the Summons Squads, those accompanying both dungeon parties, and the rest standing guard both at their base and at Viscount Granvelle’s mansion.

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The following day, Allen brought Sophie, Volmaar, and Meruru to the Adventurer’s Guild and had them officially registered as members of the No-life Gamers party. Then, when the next weekend arrived, the group did indeed split up and head to two separate dungeons. The dwarf and the elves wore hooded cloaks of their own accord in order to avoid drawing stares from those they passed on the streets.

Admitting elf and dwarf transfer students and having the top-scorers in each class look after them was a yearly occurrence at the Academy. While one reason for this was, as mentioned before, to convince the students of the existence of other races, that was not all there was to it; the exchange program was just as much about helping the students become used to fighting alongside elves and dwarves and developing a sense of camaraderie with them before meeting them on the battlefield.

“Do the dungeons in Baukis look the same, Meruru?”

“Yep, yep!”

Just as her appearance suggested, Meruru had a friendly and affable personality. She had fit in with the party in no time at all.

“So, these are what we ride when we go through the dungeons. Fran, come out.”

“Kweeeeee!”

“They’re huge!” Meruru gasped, expressing her surprise with every inch of her stout body. Allen had given her advance notice that the Gamers rode

large birds, but she still could not help but be amazed upon seeing the huge cassowary Summons in person.

“Oh my! Are we riding on these birds, Lord Allen?” Sophie exclaimed, stepping out from behind Volmaar.

“Y-Yes,” Allen replied, still somewhat unnerved by her usual enthusiasm. “Allow me to show you how.”

He approached one of the crouching Bird Cs and threw one of his legs over its back. Meruru immediately copied him, albeit with her shorter limbs, looking very excited. Volmaar assisted Sophie with mounting her ride, then settled himself onto his own.

Once everyone was ready, Allen said, “All right, let’s go! We’re aiming to clear two floors by lunchtime!”

“Understood, Lord Allen!” Sophie cried out with as much cheer as Meruru. And with that, the group charged headlong into the labyrinthian dungeon.

Sure enough, they were preparing lunch beside the entrance to the third floor several hours later. It was a simple fare consisting of bread, jerky, dried sweet potato, and fruits.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t contribute at all...” Meruru apologized. She had been given a spear and a shield to fight with, but she had not been able to use either to any effective degree.

Allen looked up from his food. “Hm? Oh, no, it’s totally fine! I understand; there aren’t any golems around here, after all.”

Meruru had been standing in the front alongside Dogora as a secondary tank, but the difference between her abilities and those of someone with maxed out levels was painfully stark. Dogora had no trouble killing monsters while tanking damage for the whole group.

Meruru’s Talent, Talos General, enabled her to ride and control magic tools in the form of golems. These golems were extremely valuable, so she had not been allowed to bring one with her to Ratash. This was why she had not been able to contribute much to the battles and was feeling especially regretful for it.

Apparently, with a good golem, she can even beat a dragon to death!

The old man who had served as Cecil’s magic tutor was a wizard intimately familiar with the battlefield. Now that he was retired *and* no longer had lessons to teach, he had plenty of time to spare. So Allen had sent the tutor a message, asking him what he knew about golems. His reply had left Allen shivering at the mere notion of what Meruru was capable of.

Possessing the right Talent was a prerequisite for controlling a golem. To control a bronze golem, one had to be a one-star Talos Pawn; an iron golem, a two-star Talos Soldier; a mithril golem, a three-star Talos General. Mithril golems were powerful enough to beat dragons with their bare fists. Golems could only move for a limited period of time, as they were powered by their operator’s MP, but they produced incredible results in limited

warfare. These golems were how the Empire of Baukis managed to successfully keep the Demon Lord Army at bay.

The flip side of this incredible ability, however, was that every single one of Meruru's skills were related to controlling golems. While she was holding an adamantite spear and shield to more or less signal her desire to be a part of the battle, she did very little actual fighting.

Seeing how downcast Meruru now looked, Allen decided to change the topic. "I've mentioned this before, but the crown prince kinda has his eyes on us, and not in a good way. Now that you three have joined us, this might cause you some trouble too."

He had already explained to the three of them that chances were high their party might get dispatched to a particularly fierce section of the front lines. He was up front about the fact that, although he did accept the task of taking care of them, they might get caught up in his own problems in turn.

"Oh, you no longer have to worry about that matter, Lord Allen. We have already sent word to my Mother Queen through Theodojiil."

"Theodojiil?" Did I know someone with that name?

"Ah, I was referring to this academy's headmaster, Lord Allen."

It was only just now that Allen learned the headmaster's name. Apparently her station was so much higher than his that she could casually refer to him by his given name. And what was more, apparently Rohzenheim was such a superpower that a single word from its queen was enough to sweep away the entire issue with the crown prince. Allen realized how reassuring it was having someone so powerful in his court, so to speak.

Within the Five Continent Alliance, said to hold the future of the world in its hands, there were three individuals with exceptional power: the emperor of the human Empire of Giamut, the emperor of the dwarven Empire of Baukis, and the queen of the elven kingdom of Rohzenheim. The heads of state of the major nations on the two southern continents were nowhere near as powerful as these three. Then far below them on the ladder were leaders like the king of Ratash, which was a comparatively tiny country that was not even a major signatory of the Alliance. And if the king was so insignificant in the grand scheme of things, the disfavor of a crown prince who had yet to even assume the throne was worth less attention than the bite of a mosquito. At least, this was the way Sophie saw things.

Continuing the conversation, Allen said, "Thank you for that. Still, we may end up getting dispatched to different locations on the battlefield."

"I'm afraid that is indeed a possibility," Sophie agreed. "After all, where each person is stationed is up to their own country's discretion."

The three new students had already learned the full Demon Lord history. This only made sense, of course—it would cause unnecessary confusion if they were to send teenagers to faraway countries without letting them know the real reason they were leaving.

The heads of each nation held exclusive rights to specify where their citizens were to be dispatched. Instructions from the Five Continent

Alliance could only be considered advice. As such, the crown prince ultimately held the power to decide where Allen, Krena, Cecil, Dogora, and Keel would be sent after graduating, and there was no guarantee that it would be the same place where Sophie and Meruru would be going.

"By the way, what's with calling me 'Lord Allen'?"

"My, does it bother you?"

"I mean, not particularly. It's just that I don't really remember doing anything to earn the title."

Though I don't really care what she calls me. It's all the same to me.

"I believe I have not discussed this yet, but Lord Rohzen prophesizes about you often, Lord Allen."

"Huh? Prophecy? What's he said?" That certainly piqued my curiosity.

"Um, it's always in fragments and it's sometimes hard to hear, but..." Sophie went on to explain that the Sovereign of Spirits was often asleep on an altar located within the palace where the queen of the elves lived.

Beginning ten years ago, Rohzen had mentioned several things in his sleep, including "a black-haired boy will be born," "under the influence of a large country on the Central Continent," and "all his stats will be ranked at the bottom." Every time he mumbled something else, the priestesses tending to him always carefully wrote down whatever he said.

Seriously? So the elves even believe in their god's sleep talking?

Allen recalled the headmaster's behavior during the entrance exam and realized that this prophecy from Rohzen had likely been taken into consideration for his enrollment.

"Fascinating. Has Lord Rohzen said anything else?"

"Of course!" Sophie smiled brightly at Allen's interest, giving off the impression that she had been waiting for him to ask about this all along. "He once said, 'Numerous shall they be, enough to cover the skies, but a black-haired man shall stand up and banish the shadows from the world.' All the elves were taken aback when we heard the message, but Lord Allen, do you know what? Today, I've become assured that this prophecy will truly come to pass!"

It was, of course, once she had seen the Summons that Sophie became convinced of the truth of the prophecy. Her eyes dazzled like the stars in the sky as she continued talking.

Chapter 14: Developing Rodin Village

It was now mid-April. The sub-party that Allen ran with the new members had finished one Rank B dungeon and were set to complete another by the end of the month.

Carlova informed Allen and Cecil that they had to take extra lessons on the fundamentals of battle strategy. The teachers selected which students to register to the course based on their performance and deeds during their first year, which was why the majority of the class roster were noble scions and dungeon party leaders. Not surprisingly, this included Rifol and Uster.

Allen was of the opinion that, generally speaking, command should be left to the nobles. After all, even commoners and serfs preferred to take orders from nobles. Nobles were used to giving servants orders, but were unaccustomed to taking orders from the lower classes. There was no need to purposely go against the hierarchical system that the country was based on.

Allen's classmates, inspired by the Gamers' progress, had applied themselves to their own dungeon delving in earnest this year. However, they were now challenging Rank B dungeons—the monsters they faced had gone up one rank from D to C, and there were now Monster Summon Traps to worry about. Allen gave everyone as much advice as he could, but he made sure to drive home the point they should always take any and all safety precautions and to not become overconfident.

As part of those precautions, Allen had begun lending his Summons out to classmates when they really needed it. Going dungeon delving with students in other classes was entirely allowed, so he also made plans to help some with taking down particular bosses. However, there was a limit to the number of Summons he possessed, and he made sure everyone fully understood this.

At the same time, the No-life Gamers had begun training to master their Extra Skills. Krena wasted no time in asking Carlova during one of their afternoon classes. Normally, this was not taught until the third year, but when she told him she had reached her level cap, he yielded and agreed to teach her. Cecil, Dogora, and Keel also approached their respective instructors. They all wanted to master their Extra Skills and learn how to use them at will as soon as possible. Allen was sure that Extra Skills could indeed be controlled, as he had seen Dagrah do so.

"Whew, we're finally here," a Bird F Summon sighed in Allen's voice as it landed in a treeless area alongside a river that cut through some dense forest.

"Oh, hi, uh...Allen?" Rodin, Allen's father, replied in a hesitant tone.

This time, Allen had dispatched seven Summons to help with the new village's land reclamation efforts. Around a hundred serfs were now staring

at all the Summons—including the Bird F that was conversing with Rodin—with apprehension and fear on their faces.

"Is that talking bird really Allen?"

"It's been a while, Mr. Gerda."

Gerda, Krena's father, was also there. Dogora's parents planned on moving to Rodin Village as well, but as they were commoners, they were scheduled to arrive the following year.

"Whoaaa! It's a big boar!" Allen's younger brother Mash exclaimed as he looked at the massive Beast C that Bird F was currently perched on top of. With sparkling eyes, he asked, "Are you gonna kill it, father?!"

Rodin shook his head. "No, son. This here's a friend who's gonna help us build the village. So, don't attack him, all right?"

"Wow! Okay, father!"

Aw, I'm glad to see Mash has grown up bright and energetic. He used to be such a crybaby, but now he doesn't even flinch when looking at a Beast C. He's so big now!

"Father and Mr. Gerda, can you take down the packages on the boars' back?"

"Packages? Ah, you mean this bag that's tied up?" Rodin clambered up and undid the fastenings of one of the bundles, then brought it down. "What's ins— Spears?"

Gerda peered over. "What? Let me see... These two look reddish. Are they rusted? But they look so glossy." He picked up one of the spears that was tinged reddish-orange from tip to butt and hoisted it.

"It's made of hihiirokane," Allen replied. "I threw them in there for the two of you."

"What's hihiirokane? Is it better than steel?" Rodin asked.

Realizing that his father had never heard the term before, Allen decided to explain it later. Instead, he said, "And, um, I've also included ten mithril spears."

"WHAT?! There are mithril spears?!" Half of the serfs rushed forward and crowded around the same bundle. They had probably heard of the metal from a knight or a merchant before. To the remaining half, however, "mithril" was a new word.

Supplies Sent to Rodin Village

- Hihiirokane Spear x 2
- Hihiirokane Shield x 2
- Mithril Spear x 10
- Mithril Armor Set x 12
- Gold Coin x 300
- A few dozen hoes and saws

Everything had been tied to the backs of three Beast Cs, which had made the trip to the settlement all the way from Academy City.

After they heard Allen's explanation on hihiirokane, Rodin and Gerda murmured, "So there are metals even more powerful than mithril..." as they examined the reddish-orange hihiirokane spears with appreciation. These two were meant for Gerda and Rodin. Allen had sent them because autumn —meaning great boar-hunting season—would eventually arrive once again.

The total cost of what Allen had sent this time came up to 1,500 gold. After talking it out with his companions, it was decided that Allen would cover half of that amount, Dogora and Krena would cover twenty percent each, and Cecil ten percent, while Keel did not have to pay. After all, these were supplies for Allen's, Dogora's, and Krena's families. It was only because Cecil had insisted on paying and had refused to back down that they accepted ten percent from her. Keel had also offered to contribute, but Allen talked him out of it by reminding him that he would still have to provide for future Carnel restoration efforts.

Thanks to Allen obtaining Strengthening Lvl. 7, the Summons Squads he sent wandering around Rank A dungeons had become a *lot* more efficient. He was now earning over two thousand gold a month from the Squads alone. All of this money went into Storage, of course, as he was saving up for when orichalcum weapons or accessories that could recover magic would appear in the Auction—not that they ever did. He had asked the Adventurer's Guild to notify him should anyone bring one into any of the other branches in the country.

Without further ado, the Beast C Summons began assisting the serfs. They were currently clearing out the tree line between the plain where the village was to be and the nearby forest. Most of the plains within the Granvelle realm were dotted with trees in the same way. The task, therefore, was to clear away such trees in the vicinity. All the wood gathered in the process would then be used as construction material.

Myulla and Mash giggled as they mischievously played around the Beast Cs, crying, "*Oink, oink!*" and "This way, piggy!"

Looks like neither of them are afraid of monsters. This is a bit of a problem. Hmm...I have an idea. It'd help pad the dinner menu too, so it'll be two birds with one stone.

Creeeeaaak... BOOM!

"Whaaaat?!"

Allen turned at the villagers' collective gasp of astonishment. They were looking at the Beast C that had gone up to a tree and bit into it, pulling up the entire thing—roots and all—in one heave, then dropped it in an open area. Promptly, the other Beast Cs began doing the same, gathering all the trees they uprooted into a neat pile. Each of them had 1,500 Attack, meaning they could bite even a murdergalsh to death. They needed neither sleep nor food and could continue working twenty-four seven.

Slightly before twilight, the serfs gathered for dinner. They had only just settled this place, so the buildings were little better than mere shacks. Theresia and Mathilda led the other women in preparing the meal. A rush of

nostalgia filled Allen as he saw the meager fare of barley porridge, potatoes, and beans.

As I'd thought, they are severely lacking in meat. They need the energy for all this backbreaking work! I'm glad I found one!

"A GREAT BOAR'S COMING! IT'S A STRAY!"

These villagers called great boars that did not return to the White Dragon Mountains even once winter arrived "strays." Allen had done his best leading one to the settlement through a Bird E that he was Shared with. The people who had been caught entirely off guard flew into a huge panic.

"Men, grab your weapons! Women, protect the children!" Rodin barked, serving his role as village chief.

Before long, the boar had reached the village center. Before the villagers could do anything, however, Spirit C floated up and assumed a position in midair as if it had been waiting for this moment in the spotlight. "Lift your spirits! This is the killer dinner that Lord Allen has brought you with his Summons!"

Multiple people mumbled, "Killer dinner?" to themselves in a daze as the great boar squealed at the top of its lungs. It dug the ground a few times in an act of intimidation, then barreled forward at the villagers.

Just as Rodin and Gerda were about to order their men to pull back further, Spirit C uttered the single word "Die!" and threw a volleyball-sized gray orb that shot toward the charging monster at incredible speed. When it made contact with the beast's mighty hard head...the head exploded. After stumbling a few more steps, the now headless great boar collapsed onto its side. Rodin, Gerda, and the villagers all stared in shock after seeing a tiny doll one-hit KO a Rank C monster.

I hope this helps Myulla and Mash gain a healthy fear of monsters.

Allen turned to look at his siblings and found them clutching each other, quivering in fear. He did feel bad orchestrating this terrifying experience for them, but the village was still in an unfinished state and lacked a proper barrier. It would be troubling if they got into their heads that it would be funny to play outside where it was unsafe.

"Here is some dead meat that you don't have to pay taxes for," Spirit C giggled, referring to the tax reduction system for new villages. For the first two years, no taxes would be collected. After that, thirty percent would be collected from all produce for the next three years, then the full sixty percent would be collected from the sixth year onward.

Thus, the development of Rodin Village kicked into high gear, proceeding in a way that threw all convention out the window thanks to the aid of Allen's Summons.



At the end of July, Krena had somehow managed to pass her general education exam. Everyone shared her sense of relief, as they had witnessed

Allen tying her down to a chair and forcing her to study all too many times. It was clear to all that she had zero motivation to do it herself.

By now, the three transfer students had finished going through the requisite number of Rank B dungeons and finished their first Rank A one. The Rank B ones did not take all that much time, thanks to the maps Allen had in his grimoire. Even these three were surprised at how little time it had taken.

At the same time, Allen, Krena, Cecil, Dogora, and Keel had finished clearing their fourth Rank A dungeon. All that was left was to use the summer break in the coming two months to complete one more elsewhere within Ratash. They had already decided which dungeon they would go to.

The group was still in the middle of mastering their Extra Skills, which turned out to be as much a mental effort as it was control over one's MP. However, there was no way for a third party to aid them in any way—they all had to work on mastering their skills by themselves.

Since April, the development of Rodin Village had gone smoothly. The villagers had finished clearing away every last tree within the area earmarked for the village and had moved on to erecting a wall before the great boars migrated in autumn. Even now, the Beast Cs were being a huge help by carrying logs and digging holes with their snouts. In order to make the most of their two years of tax exemption, the serfs planned on completing all the necessary infrastructure so that each family could begin to focus solely on farming.

Today, Allen and Krena had been summoned to the headmaster's office once again. The same thing had happened last year, so Allen had forebodings about today's business. When asked, Carlova confirmed that the other members of their party were permitted to attend as well, so the eight of them headed to the room together.

"Sir? I've brought Allen's group," Carlova said, knocking on the door.

"Mm, come in," a voice replied immediately.

The door opened. Next to the headmaster stood a familiar figure who turned around as the group entered. "Hey there, Allen. How've you been?"

Allen bowed courteously. "If it isn't Lord Helmios. I've been doing wonderfully, thank you for asking. It has been a while indeed."

"Aww, we're close, aren't we? You can drop the 'lord'!" the Hero replied, flashing his beautiful white teeth.

"I'm afraid that's not a very appropriate way of addressing the esteemed Hero," Allen said, bluntly rebuffing Helmios's overfamiliar attitude.

There was not enough sofa space to seat all eight members of the No-life Gamers plus Helmios, the headmaster, and Carlova. Therefore, they decided to sit at the round table instead. Upon settling into his chair, Helmios turned to smile at Allen. Allen made a pointed effort to ignore him.

"Headmaster, may I inquire what is the purpose of today's visit?"

Here's hoping this conversation is short and sweet so we can still make it in time for today's dungeon rounds. I mean, I'll probably say no to whatever the headmaster's going to ask anyway.

"Well, I brought you here to invite you and Krena to take part in the Martial Arts Tournament in October."

I knew it. He called us in for the same thing last time. Looks like he's doing it before summer break this year. Last year, it was right after we got back from the break when we'd cleared our first Rank A dungeon.

"Krena would be more than happy to participate, but I will have to decline," Allen said point-blank, earning him a curious look from Sophie.

"May I ask why?"

"Well…I suppose it is mainly because I have no reason to show off my power."

"I see. Would I be right in assuming Princess Sophialohne has told you about the Sovereign of Spirits?"

Did he arrange for Sophie to join our party so I'd hear that story? No, I don't think he has that authority. Ah, was it the other way?

"Yes, sir. I hear he is someone who talks a lot in his sleep."

Helmios choked on his saliva, revealing that he likely shared the same impression as Allen. Both the headmaster and Sophie smiled wryly.

"We do not fully understand the meaning of the prophecy, but it seems clear that your power will be instrumental in saving our world from the Demon Lord. This is why we very much want to know what you, as a Summoner, are capable of. It can be said that showing off your power here is for the sake of the world. Would your answer remain the same even in light of this?"

Oh? The headmaster's changed his approach. And he just mentioned the Demon Lord by name. He didn't bring it up at all last year.

"I'm afraid I beg to differ in opinion."

"How so?"

Allen proceeded to explain that the strengths and weaknesses of his power could not be properly understood within the short time frame of a few tournament matches. To avoid creating misunderstandings and let people properly understand how he could be a key asset in the fight against the Demon Lord, he would have to be entirely transparent about every last thing he could do. And there was a huge disadvantage to doing so.

"What kind of disadvantage?"

"This knowledge could also fall into the enemy's hands." And I'm still very much in the middle of developing my character. What if the demons think, "This guy is dangerous. We should snuff him out now before he gets any stronger"? I don't want to go around with a target on my back.

Although Allen had provided what he thought was the most reasonable reason for turning down participating in the tournament, he did not actually know how extensive the Demon Lord Army's intelligence network was.

“Hm… That may be true, but would it not be difficult to fight the Demon Lord Army while continuing to hide your powers?”

“Oh, no, I don’t plan on holding anything back once I’m actually on the battlefield.” It’s just that I’m not revealing my powers this time because I don’t see a need to. It’s as simple as that.

“So you insist on not participating?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You said last year that you weren’t interested because there was nothing to gain.”

“Well…pretty much.”

The headmaster sighed, then signaled Helmios with his eyes. The Hero fiddled with something on one of the fingers on his right hand, which fell onto the table. Allen followed it with his eyes until it stopped spinning and revealed itself to be a ring.

“Oh gods! I can’t believe I’ve gone and dropped my *precious* MP Recovery Ring!” Helmios cried in an exaggerated manner before hurriedly retrieving the accessory and putting it back on his finger. Pretending to not notice Allen’s gaze, he continued, “What a relief. *Whatever* would I do if I broke this ring that Rohzen made for me as a *reward* for saving that squad of elves? I’ve *got* to take better care of it.”

“It’s ‘Lord’ Rohzen to you,” the headmaster corrected under his breath.

Ignoring him, Helmios pretended to have remembered something. “Speaking of which: Allen, I heard you were looking for something in the dungeons. I’ve cleared quite a few dungeons in my time. You want some advice?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” Look at him acting so smug.

“Okay, if you say so. By the way, I don’t know what you’re looking for, but just saying, you won’t find MP Recovery Rings in a Rank A dungeon. Not even the Rank S one.”

“Huh? How can you be so sure?”

“That’s a secret. You’re not telling *me* anything, so why should I tell *you* anything?” Helmios pouted childishly.

I had a feeling he’d say that. He really knows how to push my buttons. So, what? Did he come just to brag about his ring? I don’t think that’s it.

“Oh, don’t glare at me like that. Okay, I’m a nice guy, so I’ll tell you. Dygragni can’t make MP Recovery Rings, period. It’s an issue of compatibility.”

“And you know this because…?”

“He told me himself. He said he might be able to make them after he becomes a Minor Deity, but it’s beyond him at the moment. Too bad, right? Oh, and you might be able to get your hands on orichalcum weapons if you try *really* hard, but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Meruru’s eyes became as wide as saucers upon hearing that Helmios had met with Dygragni directly. Her surprise spoke volumes about what a privilege such an audience was.

Helmios must have gotten my information from the Adventurer's Guild. This world seriously doesn't understand the idea of client confidentiality. Hmm, but...

"What do you mean you don't recommend it?"

"You'll be going as your party of eight, right? If you enter the Rank S dungeon the way you are now, even if you don't all die, you'd still lose a few people and be forced to turn back."

Helmios sounded certain of what he was saying. During this conversation, he had already finished peeking at the No-life Gamers' stats.

"What are you getting at, then?"

"I've talked it out with the headmaster here. The winner of this year's tournament will get to fight me instead of Dverg. If you beat me, I don't mind giving you this ring."

I see. Assuming that this self-proclaimed Hero isn't lying, the only ways of obtaining an MP Recovery Ring are to beat him or to make the elves indebted to me and press the Sovereign of Spirits for one. Which way is more certain? ...No, in situations like these, the smart thing is to go for both.

His party members watched him, somewhat surprised to see him taking so long to make up his mind. Finally, Allen spoke up.

"If I'm to participate, I have two conditions."

"Let's hear them."

"First, Krena's been really looking forward to fighting Lord Dverg. Please let that fight go on as usual. Is Sword Lord Dverg coming to Academy City this year?"

"Mm-hm, he sure is. The plan is to let him fight with the runner-up of the tournament," Helmios confirmed. "What's your other condition?"

"I want to check if that ring is the real deal."

"Sure. Here you go."

Accepting the ring that Helmios handed over without a second thought, Allen put it on after he depleted his MP by using multiple skills.

Whoa, it's recovering one percent of my max MP per second. Okay, I really do want this. I can use it to earn more Skill XP, and I also don't have to worry about running out of MP in battle anymore.

"Interesting. So you have a way to gauge how much MP you have."

What?! Oh...well, I guess he can have that tidbit. He did give me pretty important info, after all.

"I'm not sure I follow, but at the very least, this ring does seem to be real." Allen took the ring off and returned it to Helmios.

The headmaster, who had remained quiet this whole time, spoke up. "So, is this enough of a reason for you to participate in the tournament?"

"Yes, sir," Allen nodded. "Please secure a place for me in this year's tournament. By the way, am I allowed to bring in whatever weapons and items I want?"

“Of course. You have two months till then, so make all the preparations you desire.”

So recovery items are allowed too.

“Thank you, sir. I will do my best.”

And so it was decided that Allen would be taking part in this year’s Martial Arts Tournament at the Ratashian Academy.

Chapter 15: The Martial Arts Tournament (Part 2)

And so Allen decided to participate in this year's Martial Arts Tournament. After he won, he would fight Hero Helmios in order to get his MP Recovery Ring. Allen was not someone who would expose his powers for no reason, but if there *was* a reason, he would not hold back. He resolved to use every means at his disposal to beat the Hero black-and-blue in front of the visiting aristocrats and foreign dignitaries, and thus seize the all-important ring.

"So yep, I'll be in the tournament two months from now," Allen said, kicking off the party's regular meeting at their base.

"Can't say I'm surprised," Cecil sighed. "So, what're you going to do? Can you really beat the Hero?"

By now, Cecil had gotten used to this mercenary side to Allen. However, his opponent-to-be was the Hero, the man said to be humanity's last hope. He was the one who had reversed the Alliance's decades of consecutive losses and helped regain large swathes of territory. Understandably, Cecil was having difficulty visualizing Allen coming out on top of this encounter.

"The way I currently am? Probably not. So that's why I'm thinking of going out and doing my own thing next month, during summer break."

"What?! Explain," Cecil demanded, sensing that Allen was dead serious about beating the Hero and had come up with another incomprehensible scheme to do so.

"I'll be gathering magic stones not only from Academy City, but all over Ratash. I'll also be actively searching for all the best items that can be had."

In order to raise his Summoning to Lvl. 7 by the end of summer break, Allen needed a mind-boggling amount of MP. He could gain MP from Seeds of Magic, but to make them, he needed Rank D magic stones. He had been gathering as many Rank D stones as he could at Academy City for quite a while now, but at the current pace, the soonest he would reach Lvl. 7 was next year.

Thankfully, there were several cities the size of Academy City within Ratash. He planned on traveling between them multiple times via magic ship, keeping the same request for Rank D magic stones active in all places at any given time. While the Adventurer's Guild in one city would be in the middle of gathering the stones for him, he would go to the next city to make the same request, and so on and so forth. This way, he would be maxing out the number of magic stones the entire *country* could gather for him.

Guess I might as well request Rank E and C magic stones too, while I'm at it. After all, I have no idea when I'll get the opportunity to do something like this again. Okay, let's aim to gather one million of each rank.

Allen currently had plenty of money in his pockets—to the tune of 28,000 gold coins—so he was considering seriously stocking up on magic stones. He had heard that the monsters on the battlefield were all at least Rank B, so this seemed like a good opportunity to build up a cache of the lower-ranked stones.

And of course, if he came upon valuable items on his travels, he would make sure to procure them as well. The hope was that there would be at least one orichalcum weapon available for sale somewhere in the country, but Allen knew his chances were not high. Instead, he would be focusing his search on accessories, such as rings that boosted a stat by at least +500.

"What should we be doing in the meantime then, Lord Allen?" Sophie asked.

"The way I see it, you have two options," Allen replied. "So, I want all of you to talk it out and decide which you prefer."

The first option would be to stick to their original plan and make for a Rank A dungeon outside of Academy City. The three new additions to the party had only finished clearing one Rank A dungeon so far, so their second would be this one located elsewhere in the country.

The second option would be to help the newcomers go through the remaining three Rank A dungeons in Academy City.

Allen reassured them that either way, he would be providing them with all the Summons they needed—if they lost any, he would send more during his time on the ground in between magic ship rides. It was only he himself who would be absent on these dungeon runs.

Dogora crossed his arms, frowning in thought. "I see... Well, I don't see any reason to deviate from our original plan. Since summer break *is* the only time we can clear a Rank A dungeon in another city."

His logic was sound, so everyone else expressed their agreement with him.

"Thank you for allowing us to join all of you for your fifth and last Rank A dungeon," Sophie said appreciatively. "However, Lord Allen, what are your thoughts on what Hero Helmios said? Are you truly considering challenging the Rank S dungeon?"

Helmios had said that if the No-life Gamers were to attempt the Rank S dungeon in their current state, they would suffer casualties and be forced to give up along the way. Everyone looked at Allen with worry in their eyes.

Now that I think about it, it probably isn't a coincidence that the Hero made contact with us now of all times. We're currently on track to finish our fifth Rank A dungeon and about to start considering heading to the Rank S one. Not that we know where it's located, though.

At first, Allen had thought Helmios had come to Academy City simply because he was curious about Allen's abilities, but he now realized that it was entirely possible the Hero had also come to dissuade him from charging into the Rank S dungeon so soon.

“In any case, we’ll first focus on completing all five Rank A dungeons. *Then* we can sit down and talk about what to do after that. How’s that sound?” Allen offered.

There was no need to make a decision now. With the addition of the new members, it would still be quite some time before the No-life Gamers could enter the Rank S dungeon. By that time, Allen’s Summoning should have leveled up, giving him access to even more Summons and thus more options.

“Fine with me,” Cecil agreed. “But what will you do about the dungeon requirement, Allen? You’ll be the only one who’s lacking the last dungeon.”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about me. I’ll find time and follow after you guys.”

Allen could map the dungeon his friends were going through by Sharing the vision of one of the Summons with them. With that map in hand, he could then ride Bird C, activate Idaten, and then rush through in the blink of an eye.

“All right. So, we’re still going to Feldora, right?” Keel asked for confirmation’s sake.

Feldora was a fortified city built on the northern border of Ratash in order to fend off invasions from the Empire of Giamut. Several dungeons could be found within its walls, some of which were Rank A. Though not quite on par with Academy City, it was still a rather lively city with a sizable population. It had its own Adventurer’s Guild branch too, so Allen would be able to meet up with the rest of the party whenever he dropped by to pick up magic stones.

Allen nodded. “I don’t see any need to change that. You’ll be bringing Nina and the rest along with you, right?”

“If possible, yes.”

“Then let’s do it. We have more than enough money to make it happen. It makes it easier for me too, not having to assign Summons to protect so many places at once.”

Transportation alone would cost one gold per person, on top of which would be all the costs associated with setting up a new home base. The account dedicated to paying for everyone’s meals and costs of living as well as the servants’ wages had a balance of more than two thousand gold. When the number of party members had increased to eight, each person’s share had gone from a sixth to a ninth of the loot total, but because they were now going through Rank A dungeons, the value of each person’s share had actually gone up. Meruru, whose family was not especially affluent, had been moved by just how much she could send home to her parents.

“All right, I guess that’s it for today’s meeting?”

“I have a question, Mr. Allen! Me, me!” Krena raised her hand as if she was in class.

Allen played along, adopting the role of the homeroom teacher. “Yes, Krena? What is your question?”

“Mr. Allen! Does this mean I’m supposed to beat the Hero and give you the ring?!”

Oh! She’s finally caught on. I like the confidence on her face.

All the talk so far had been based on the assumption that Allen would be the one to win the tournament and go on to fight Helmios. According to this plot, Krena would lose to Allen and receive the reward for the runner-up: a fight with Sword Lord Dverg. And Krena had figured this out.

“Good question! That’s a yes, but only if you manage to beat me!”

“I know I will! I still haven’t gotten my rematch from when you left the village!”

“I’ll look forward to it. You’re really gonna have to bring your A game though!”

Ever since Allen left Krena Village at the age of eight, they had not had a proper match. This was a declaration of war from Krena, who had lost their final “playing knight” match and was eagerly looking for an opportunity to redeem herself. Consequently, there was now one more important fight on the program.



When summer break began and Allen set off on his own, the rest of the No-life Gamers changed their base of operations to Feldora and picked a Rank A dungeon to challenge. Although Allen was not with them, they did now have three more members, so they had no problems clearing the dungeon within their two months off of school. During this time, the transfer students’ levels shot up like rockets.

A few days after them, Allen also finished the same dungeon. The Executive Dungeon System did not appear after he killed the boss on the lowest level, likely because the three new additions to the party needed to meet the quota as well. So, the party agreed to go through the three dungeons they needed all together. When Allen returned to Academy City near the end of September, he also helped them out.

During these past two months, Allen had fully maximized the number of magic stones he could purchase within Ratash. As originally planned, he now had roughly a million Rank E and D stones. Rank C ones cost the most, so he kept those to a hundred thousand. Once school resumed in October, he planned on going back to only purchasing magic stones within Academy City.

Allen had also successfully obtained Summoning Lvl. 7. In addition to having all associated skills at Lvl. 7, he now also had access to Rank B Summons, all of which he had already analyzed in full.

Then October arrived, and Allen turned fourteen.

Today was the Martial Arts Tournament. The preliminaries with the starting hundred participants were long over; it was now the semifinal matches between those in the top sixteen spots. At the moment, Allen was standing across from a muscular teenage boy around his age who was

holding a greatsword. Positioned between them was the referee who would oversee their coming bout.

The referee explained the rules: how if someone surrenders, the other party has to immediately stop attacking, what the pose for surrendering looked like, and so on and so forth. The same explanation had been repeated multiple times since the day before, but apparently the referee was duty bound to go over them before every single match. Eventually, he finished, ending with a warning that there had been multiple cases of students getting too heated in the moment of battle and killing their opponents.

The brawny boy with a mithril greatsword glared at Allen. He was a third-year student.

"Both sides, ready..."

Allen lifted his adamantite sword.

"...FIGHT!"

The other boy immediately lunged forward. Allen dodged every one of his attacks with the slightest of movements, feeling the incredible gusts of wind generated by each swing passing by.

If I remember correctly, the other two people in the semifinals aside from Krena and me have two-star classes.

Although Allen was deep in thought, it was not because he was taking his opponent lightly. He was simply not the type whose mind would freeze in the face of danger, even if he was literally on the verge of being killed. It had been the same back when he was about to be eaten by a murdergalsh. Having over a thousand points in Intelligence prevented his mind from simply shutting down.

Roughly one in ten Talented had a two-star class. Each year, out of the entire student body of five thousand, one hundred were chosen to participate in this tournament. The number of stars meant a significant difference in stat growth potential and the number of skills obtainable between classes. Given all this, it was only natural for most of the participants to have two-star classes.

The older student believed that Allen was mocking him by making it look like his attacks were easy to dodge, and he seemed to be taking it personally. He grew increasingly incensed, and his swings got wider and sloppier with time.

I guess he's still a student after all. It'll be dangerous if you fly off the handle like that on the battlefield, you know?

Of course, Allen was not one to let an opportunity pass by. He closed in on his opponent in the blink of an eye and, after shifting to a single-handed grip, slammed a fist into the older student's mithril armor.

CRASH!

The sound of the impact reverberated throughout the arena as the other boy wordlessly crumpled to his knees, spasming. The strike had proved more than enough to finish him off.

The referee hurried over. After checking on the boy, he nodded toward the commentator box and raised his right arm into the air, signaling the end of the match.

“And there you have it, ladies and gents! The winner is Allen, the student recommended by the headmaster himself! Just like all the fights before, he doesn’t seem to have even broken a sweat. Will he go on to take the championship? Coming up, the final match between Allen and Krena!”

The emcee announced Allen’s victory, transmitting it throughout the venue using a loudspeaker-like magic tool. For some reason, he had always included the phrase “the student recommended by the headmaster” whenever introducing Allen this whole tournament. Allen simply thought it was because most students were recommended by their homeroom teacher and that it was rare for a participant to be backed by the headmaster directly, making it a detail that spiced up the commentary.

Allen did not bother celebrating his victory. Instead, he used the Bird E circling up in the school to scour the spectator stands. *Yep, looks like the crown prince came again this year.*

The man was once again in attendance with ministers and major nobles within his faction, flaunting his influence. Close by were, as always, dignitaries hailing from other countries. One of the purposes of the Martial Arts Tournament was to demonstrate to the other nations that this Academy was properly fulfilling its role in cultivating new soldiers for the battle against the Demon Lord Army. How these matches turned out reflected on the host country’s reputation; if the matches were dull and tepid, the country in question was likely to hear plenty of snide remarks at the table of the Five Continent Alliance.

Viscount Granvelle was also sitting in the stands, right next to Cecil. Perhaps he had come again this year out of concern after hearing that the crown prince would be present once more. Or perhaps he was feeling lonely, since Cecil had not been able to return home during her breaks. Either way, he was here now, accompanied by not only his knight captain but also his butler.

I was the one who served him last year. Was he not happy enough with how I did?

“So the finalists this year are both second-year students. One of them seems to be a Sword Lord; she’s the one who won last year,” one audience member commented.

“Who’s the other one? The pamphlet handed out by the school lists him as a Summoner. What’s that?” someone else asked. No one in the stands had any idea what Allen’s Talent did, and so they had trouble predicting who would win.

Roughly half an hour later, it was finally time for the final match. This break between bouts was usually for healing up any contestants who were badly wounded and to confirm that they really did want to go through with

this fight. Today, however, Allen and Krena had reached the finals without a single major injury.

"It's been so long!" Krena exclaimed with excitement. Her breathing was quicker than usual and her cheeks were flushed. She looked nothing short of delighted. The last time she and Allen had faced each other this way was before he headed off to serve House Granvelle as a servant six years ago.

"Krena, just to confirm one last time—me getting serious means using my Summoning skills. Are you sure about doing this?"

Even though Allen had already asked this question last night, he could not help but to do it again.

"Of course! Make sure you go all out!"

Before this match, Allen and Krena had agreed on two rules: they were not to use recovery items, but they were allowed to use all their skills.

When the two got into their starting positions, Krena added, "I'd have too much of an advantage if we were only fighting with swords. I don't want you to hold anything back!" Clearly, she had done her best in thinking about how to win this match.

Allen held his sword at the ready, simply replying, "All right, then." When he saw Krena do the same, for some strange reason, he half expected her to shout, "I am Krena the knight!" like in the old days.

"Both sides, ready... FIGHT!"

Krena immediately charged forward, her adamantite greatsword held tightly in her hands. Allen parried her first swing, but he felt its impact all the way in his bones. She began pressing her attack.

As I'd thought, when skill level goes up, so does weapon damage and proficiency. The difference between three levels of Sword Mastery is huge.

Allen's Sword Mastery was still at Lvl. 3, but Krena had already maxed hers out at Lvl. 6. The proficiency with which they each handled their weapons was obvious to see.

That said, I still have more Agility and Attack than her.

Naturally, Allen had adjusted the cards in his holders for the sake of this fight. Although he was behind in skill level, he more than matched Krena in her best stat with over 4,000 Attack.

The audience buzzed with excitement, chattering about how incredible this year's final match was.

"YAAAAAAH!"

With a great cry, Krena unleashed an upward slash significantly more powerful than all her other attacks before. Just the sword tip slicing through the air alone was enough to split apart the ground of the arena. Allen had no trouble evading such a large swing. At that moment, however, Krena's sword flashed red and started burning.

Oh! She's using Pyroblast.

Caught off guard, Allen ended up taking the Sword Lord's skill head-on. The audience gasped and screamed, thinking him dead. For a split second Krena beamed, certain of her victory.

“C’mon, Krena, you shouldn’t let your guard down. Not when the match is still going on.”

“Huh?”

In the brief window available, Allen’s adamantite sword slammed into Krena’s flank.

“’Cuz this happens.”

“Ugh...! H-How?!”

Allen looked entirely unhurt. Heh heh, she looks surprised. I’m glad I raised Summoning to Lvl. 7.

From this point on, Krena was forced onto the back foot. The blow she took to her side made it difficult for her to breathe properly, and the match became one-sided. Several exchanges later, Allen’s sword was at Krena’s throat.

It was clear to anyone that she had lost. With her downcast face full of regret, Krena said, “I surrender.”

The commentator declared Allen’s victory. “Are you as surprised as I am?! Sword Lord Krena has lost to Allen, the student recommended by the headmaster! All right, folks, we’ll now enter a short intermission. Next up is the fight between Sword Lord Krena and Sword Lord Dverg!”

And so, to the audience’s complete astonishment, the champion of this year’s Martial Arts Tournament was Allen, the student recommended by the headmaster.



Allen had beaten Krena. She had the higher skill level, but when he had full use of his Summoning powers, he was absolutely certain he would win. After all, he had a lot more battle experience than she did. Not everyone would fight fair and square and attack straight from the front. There were bound to be enemies within the Demon Lord Army who would aim to exploit their weaknesses and use underhanded strategies. To this end, Allen did not tell Krena what he had done in their fight. He wanted her to come up with a counterstrategy by herself.

Because Krena had not actually taken all that much damage, it did not take long for her to prepare for her match with Dverg. The two faced each other on the stage, adamantite greatswords in hand.

They have the same weapons. And if Dverg is in Normal Mode too, then they should be at the same level.

Allen’s understanding was that almost no one in this world was in Hell Mode. He was less sure about Extra Mode, the one that required ten times the amount of XP to level up compared to Normal Mode. Although he had yet to meet anyone in Extra Mode, he thought it more likely than someone in Hell Mode. He was expecting this match between Dverg and Krena to reveal whether Dverg was in Normal or Extra.

“Can Krena actually win? What do you think?” Cecil asked Allen, her voice full of anxiety.

Mistakenly thinking her question was directed at him, Viscount Granvelle replied, “Hmm, I’m not quite sure. You saw how much stronger he was last year. It might be difficult for her.”

Cecil fell silent.

Ha ha, I imagine this happens a lot among family members.

Thanks to the viscount making the arrangements, all seven members of the No-life Gamers were sitting together in the part of the stands reserved for aristocrats. Of course, the fact that Princess Sophie was among them had played a huge role in getting the request authorized.

Hm? The Hero is talking with the headmaster about something.

The Bird E assigned to keep an eye on the crown prince noticed the headmaster and Helmios with their heads bent together. *Since they’re looking at Dverg and Krena, I guess they must be talking about the upcoming match.*

Bringing his attention back to his surroundings, Allen replied to Cecil’s earlier question. “Well, she’s wearing what we won off the Auction, so I think she has a fair chance.”

Feeling reassured by his reply, Cecil breathed a sigh of relief and flashed him a smile. He was referring to the two +1,000 Agility Rings that the party had obtained over the summer break. It was his pet theory that Agility was the most crucial stat when it came to fighting against other people. If Dverg was also in Normal Mode, then Krena should be able to run circles around him with her bolstered speed.

“I am he who hunts monsters. I am he who buries demons. I am he who brings ruin to Demonic Deities.”

Just like last year, Dverg mumbled something to himself as he gripped his greatsword tightly. Krena became distracted by what he was saying for a moment, but quickly returned her focus to the fight.

“You’ve come far in a year.”

“Sure have! I worked hard with my friends!”

The referee had already signaled the start of the fight, but the two seemed determined to take things at their own pace again this year.

“I see, with your friends...” Dverg repeated in an appreciative tone. He finally lifted his weapon above his head, assuming a high guard stance. “Very well, come at me, then! Show me the fruits of all the effort you put in!”

“Mm-hm, okay! Here I come!”

Thanks to her maxed-out level and the two Agility Rings, Krena closed the distance in a blink of an eye and entered Dverg’s range with ease. The two Sword Lords then launched into a furious exchange of blows. Every attack packed ridiculous power due to their overwhelming stats. The cacophony of metal on metal made such a din that the onlookers found themselves wondering just what they had been watching during the previous matches. Many of them felt the sound of each blow resonating within their very cores.

Normally, visitors would be able to gauge roughly how powerful the tournament participants would eventually become. This year, however, Krena's strength at her level cap far exceeded anyone's comprehension.

Allen rarely commented on fights out loud, but he did so now so that his companions could fully appreciate what was happening. "It's a pretty close fight so far, but Krena seems to be slightly on the ropes due to the difference in their equipment. I knew it; there is better equipment out there than what's available on the Auction."

The party had won the two +1,000 Agility Rings for around three thousand gold each. And yet, Dverg appeared to be the faster of the two. That could only mean he was wearing equipment beyond whatever the Auction dealt in.

"RAAAAH! What's wrong, Sword Lord Krena?! Is that all you've got?!"

"Oof!"

Less than ten minutes into the match, anyone could now see that Dverg had the upper hand. He was using everything at his disposal, leading Krena around by the nose with bluffs, feints, and intimidation. The difference in battle experience between him and Krena was beginning to really show.

"She's...losing," Cecil murmured worriedly as Dogora watched on in silence, his arms crossed.

"Dverg is learning to read her moves," Allen explained. "On the other hand, she's failing to do the same, so she's taking hits."

Uh-oh, the gap in their player skill is just far too great.

"Player skill" was, well, how good a player was at a game. This involved knowing which skills to use at specific moments during a fight, being able to read an opponent's attacks, and moving in ways that made it hard for the opponent to read them in turn. Krena had learned plenty of this from Carlova, but player skill was not something that could be picked up in a day.

The contrast between the two Sword Lords was growing increasingly stark, and it was only a matter of time before Krena would lose. Once again, Dverg sent her flying with a mighty swing of his sword. She slammed against the hard ground of the arena, already hurt all over from many such falls.

"What's wrong?! Get up! Or are you done?!"

In response to Dverg's provocation, a heat haze burst out around Krena's body.

"YAH!"

"Mm? Oh, is this your Extra Skill?"

Yes! She pulled it off! Go, go, go!

Even after half a year of lessons with Carlova, the chances of Krena activating her Extra Skill Limit Break were still low. This time, thankfully, had been one of the exceptions.

The control of Extra Skills relied heavily on one's mental state. If the user was inexperienced or greatly flustered, they could lose themselves to

the skill. If that happened, the skill would get out of control and could potentially lead to the deaths of the user's teammates.

How's she doing this time?

Allen recalled the numerous times when Krena had lost herself during their Rank A dungeon runs. Just as concern flitted across his mind, Krena charged at Dverg even faster than before. One horizontal swing of her weapon sent Dverg hurtling off for the first time in this fight.

"Ugh! What's with that strength? Is this your...?!"

"YAH!"

Instead of answering, Krena simply continued swinging her sword.

Oh no, she's completely lost herself to her skill.



After Krena activated Limit Break, Dverg became the one fending for his life. The gap between their stats was so drastic that player skill no longer mattered; now he was the one who was sent flying every time their swords clashed.

This unexpected development left the audience shell-shocked. Soon, Dverg no longer had the strength to even hold his sword. Krena lifted her weapon high up and brought it down like a flash of lightning, with Dverg only barely blocking it in the nick of time. The shockwave from the impact traveled down through his body and pulverized the ground.

"Ugh!"

Krena did not let up her attack. Now that his guard was down, she had no trouble landing a kick squarely in his stomach. As she was no longer capable of holding back, she used all of her 7,000 Attack to kick Dverg's body away. He bounced several times like a skipping stone until finally crashing against one of the walls of the arena. He did not get up.

"Did Krena win?" Allen asked, leaning forward in his seat. However, his joy was short-lived.

Dverg slowly stood up, mumbling something under his breath.

Huh? What's he saying? Is he surrendering?

The Bird E in the sky focused on Dverg's beaten-up form.

"Me? Lose? No, Clasys. Don't worry. I cannot lose. That's right; I can't allow myself to lose, no matter who it is I'm fighting. I won't lose, not even against a Demonic Deity!"

Suddenly, Dverg's body also took on a heat haze.

Wait, Dverg is using his too?

"Watch out, Krena! Dverg's activated his Extra Skill!"

Krena's Extra Skill is still going strong, though. Can she push through and finish things in time?

"GUARD BREAK!"

Immediately, Dverg barreled toward Krena. Howling at the top of his lungs, he slashed down, perfectly utilizing every ounce of momentum from his charge. His adamantite greatsword shone with a brilliant light as it sliced through Krena's weapon, which she had lifted up to block his attack, like a hot knife through butter.

"Huh?"

Dverg's sword continued its inexorable swing downward. Krena froze in place, half from surprise at her sword being cleaved in two, half from fear at the certainty of impending death.

KLAAAAAANG!

A golden sword that seemed to appear out of nowhere blocked Dverg's attack in the nick of time. The person holding it was a young man with hair the color of water.

Huh? The Hero?

Helmios had apparently sensed something was off with Dverg and rushed over from his seat in the spectator stands.

"C'mon, Dverg. You were *this* close to killing the girl."

"*Nnn...* Huh? Wait, I..."

The light of madness slowly faded from Dverg's eyes.

"This isn't like you at all, losing yourself to your skill like this."

"I... I did? Against such a young girl...?"

Dverg was so shocked that he crumpled to his knees. His greatsword fell to the ground as he stared at his hands, shaking in disbelief.

"Are you okay, Mr. Dverg?" Krena peered into his face, worried. However, her innocent expression only served to worsen his shock.

"Krena... This match is your win. I ruined your sword, right?" After he calmed down a little, Dverg finally began to understand what had happened. "Sorry about that. Take mine."

"What?"

Dverg practically shoved the weapon into Krena's hands before stumbling out of the arena, leaning on Helmios's shoulder. She watched his receding back, clutching his greatsword.

And this was how the second match between Krena and Dverg ended.

Chapter 16: Fighting against Helmios the Hero

With Dverg's admission of defeat, his duel with Krena ended as her victory. This no-holds-barred match between two Sword Lords had been witnessed by visiting dignitaries from multiple countries, the crown prince of Ratash and other Ratashian nobility, and the entire student body. Everyone had been staying stock-still and silent in an effort to catch every last detail of the fight, but once it was over, they naturally burst into a huge uproar.

As Allen made his way to the stage for his own fight, he cast a look toward Krena, who had returned to the spectator stands. She still appeared down.

"You worried about your friend?" Helmios asked him. This man standing in front of Allen was his opponent for the coming match. He was wearing the same smile that he had never let slip since Allen first met him.

"I suppose I am. Thank you for saving her just now." Allen bowed his head in sincere gratitude. There was no telling what might have become of Krena if Helmios had not stopped Dverg in time.

"Oh, *psh*, don't worry about it. Dverg's just a sore loser—I was just ready for it, that's all." In other words, Helmios had predicted both Krena putting up a good fight and Dverg going berserk, and had therefore readied himself to rush onto stage at any moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer cried, interrupting their conversation, "that brings us to the last match of the day! As I'm sure all of our esteemed visitors are aware, normally we end the Martial Arts Tournament with a fight between the champion and Sword Lord Dverg. Today, however, Hero Helmios has said that he wishes to give a student some personal instruction!"

Allen and Helmios both turned and assumed their starting positions as the announcer's voice continued ringing throughout the venue.

"Everyone, please take a look at the pamphlets that you were handed. It details the history of today's champion, Allen. He is the founder and leader of the adventurer party No-life Gamers, which consists of only eight members. And with just those eight, they have already cleared *five* Rank A dungeons!"

Though three of us still have three more to go.

As members of the audience tried to get a better look at Allen, more than one person murmured things along the lines of "That does sound impressive, but is he really that big a deal?" He was indeed strong, but they failed to understand why the Hero wished to personally have a match with him. Bewilderment filled the atmosphere in the arena.

"Ha ha ha! Look at you, being the center of attention!"

“A downright bother. I wonder whose fault it is.”

“Hey, don’t worry, you’ll get used to it soon. After all, I did. Oh, right—feel free to use whatever skill you want. No matter what happens this match, the headmaster and Rohzenheim will take full responsibility!”

So this was what he was confirming with the headmaster earlier. Well, it’s not like I planned on holding back in the first place.

“I see. However, I don’t like unnecessary conflict. If you surrender now and hand over your MP Recovery Ring without a fuss, you’ll be spared a lot of pain.”

The referee, who had been waiting for a good time to signal the start of the match, goggled at Allen like a fish when he heard this. He was an Academy teacher and naturally knew about the Demon Lord. In the eyes of everyone who knew of the Demon Lord’s existence, the Hero was an apostle sent by the gods, the one to bring salvation to their world that was on a path of certain doom, the one who stood against the Demon Lord Army that had already massacred millions. The Hero was an existence that stood much, much higher than a Sword Lord. And yet, a mere school student had just asked this Hero to surrender. The teacher could not imagine it happening even if the sun were to rise from the west.

“That’s a funny joke. I don’t know how much unnecessary effort you put in, but you won’t beat me. You know that, right?”

“No effort is ever unnecessary,” Allen coolly replied.

“Hm! An interesting take.”

Helmios was still grinning with composure, but Allen was not bothered in the slightest. He was a hundred percent sure the Hero was only in Normal Mode after seeing Helmios’s Status during his entrance exam. The referee, looking somewhat bothered by the disturbing conversation he had just overheard, proceeded to go through his explanation spiel.

I swear I’ll make you assume the surrender pose.

As Allen psyched himself up, Helmios, who had actually been listening to the referee, drew his sword. The golden blade was made of orichalcum, the very material that Allen had been searching for to no avail.

“FIGHT!”

Helmios adopted a fighting stance, then remained motionless.

I see. So he wants me to make the first move.

Seeing this, Allen brazenly chose to look away from the Hero to check his own Status and cards.

[redacted]

```
Name: Allen
Age: 14
Class: Summoner
Level: 55
HP: 1,390 + 550
MP: 2,180
```

Attack: 766 + 4,900
Endurance: 766 + 750
Agility: 1,429 + 4,920 + 2,000 (Ring)
Intelligence: 2,190 + 220
Luck: 1,429
Skills: Summoning {7}, Creation {7}, Synthesis {7}, Strengthening {7}, Awakening {7}, Expansion {6}, Storage, Sharing, Quick Summoning, Deputize (Sealed), Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 489,264,755/1,000,000,000

[redacted]

Of course, Allen was still on guard. He was Sharing with two Bird Es up in the sky that were constantly observing Helmios with Hawk Eye. This was an Ability that not only allowed him to observe enemies from high up in the sky, but it was also capable of picking up even incredibly slight movements.

"What's wrong, Allen? You're not going to come at me?"

"Huh? I'm showing you an opening, so why aren't *you* attacking me, oh esteemed Hero?"

"Ahhh...I see. Okay then, here I come!"

Judging by the look of understanding on his face, Helmios was not rising to Allen's provocation. Even so, he took a step forward; that single step cracked the stage. With as much speed as Krena had displayed when using Limit Break, he charged toward Allen in a straight line.

Damn, that speed of his really is ridiculous! Though I already had an inkling of how fast he could be when he saved Krena from Dverg.

In the blink of an eye, Helmios was right in front of Allen, already swinging his orichalcum sword. Allen met it with his adamantite one, filling the entire venue with the sound of a single piercing metallic crash. Visitors and students alike buzzed with excitement.

"Dude, did you see that?! He just blocked the Hero's attack!"

"Isn't he just holding back so the student can save some face?"

"I bet that's it. I heard that the Hero's sword can cut even a dragon with ease!"

Excitement quickly filled the air as the spectators grew more invested in their first time seeing the Hero in action. VIPs from various countries began appraising this match in earnest.

Oof, I tried blocking the strike head-on to see how powerful it is, but now I'm really regretting it. So, this is how powerful he is without his skills. I mean, I'm sure that lowering my Endurance didn't help me any.

Allen was actually a bit panicked from getting a direct taste of Helmios's Attack. Because his own Attack was currently over five thousand, he was able to tell that if Helmios's attacks landed anywhere other than his sword, that alone would be enough to be fatal. He therefore shifted his fighting style from being defensive to being evasive.

Allen pulled away with a powerful backward jump, but Helmios showed no signs of giving chase.

"Huuuuh? That's strange. With your Attack, you shouldn't have been able to block that blow just now," the Hero murmured, puzzled, as he kept his body frozen in the same position it had been when his sword had met Allen's. He gripped and re-gripped his sword as if reliving the sensation from just now.

"Whatever can you be talking about?" Allen replied.

Yep, that confirms that the Analyze skill does show him what my stats are in combination with the boosts from my skills; conversely, it doesn't show him my Summons' blessings. Which means he can't see it when I adjust my stats. I had suspected as much during my entrance exam, but now I know for certain.

"Well, either way, let's continue!" Unfortunately, Helmios was not about to just stand around. He resumed his assault, not giving Allen any more time to think. The boy dodged the attacks as best he could but still ended up taking a few hits.

Eventually, he ended up using his sword to block an attack he could not invade in time. The impact of the blow shook him to his core, drawing a grunt from him. Seeing him off-balance, the Hero pressed his attack, leaving Allen completely on the back foot.

"Aww, you're already done?" the Hero sighed in disappointment.

So, my Agility is about on par with the Hero's. His Sword Mastery is significantly higher than mine, which means I won't be able to catch him with normal attacks. All right, let's try upping the number of attacks I dish out at the same time.

Allen called out a Summon that he had on standby. "Dora, let's do this."

"So, my time has finally come, Master!"

A ten-meter-long dragon, a Dragon B, charged at Helmios from his blind spot. Allen had gained access to this Summon when he reached Summoning Lvl. 7.

"Huh?!"

Ignoring the astonishment on Helmios's face, the creature rushed at him with its mouth opened wide, its razor-sharp teeth glistening. Although he had been caught by surprise, the Hero managed to bring his sword up in time to defend himself. That instant, Allen landed a sideways swing on the Hero's flank.

The sudden appearance of the dragon plunged the audience into a huge panic.

"IT'S A DRAGOOOOOON!!!"

"A DRAGON'S APPEARED IN THE ARENA!!!"

They screamed and elbowed each other while making a mad scramble for the exits. The headmaster immediately gave the announcer instructions, but there was something else that was occupying Allen's attention. Namely, how it felt when he landed his very first blow on the Hero.

He's so freakin' tough!

Allen's hands hurt many times worse than when he had fought that dragon boss in one of the Rank A dungeons. He could not even imagine how high Helmios's Endurance stat was.

And he hasn't even used a skill yet.

There was no changing the fact that this was a situation in which Allen could not afford to let down his guard, even for one second. He had managed to throw off the Hero's equilibrium with his Summon, but Helmios still did not feel cornered enough to break out any skills.

"Dora, use Hellfire of Fury!"

"Understood, Master."

As Allen continued attacking with his weapon, the Dragon B beside him gathered red-hot flames in its open mouth. Helmios tried to move out of the way, but Allen doubled his attacks.

"You're not getting away!"

While keeping the Hero in place, Allen kept an eye on the situation through his dragon's eyes. Suddenly, he backed off and made a feint, then instructed Dora to unleash its Awakened Ability, Hellfire of Fury. A blinding stream of infernal flames enveloped the Hero, blasting him head-on. Unable to bear the attack, Helmios immediately retreated into the sky and hovered there, recollecting himself.

The Hero can fly too? That's the third skill he's used. Huh? Now he's using Healing Magic on himself.

Before long, all of the Hero's wounds disappeared without a trace. As he floated there in the air, the audience, who now understood that they were safe from the dragon, watched him with praise on their lips.

"The Hero is fighting on even ground with the dragon!" someone cried.

With his golden sword and armor, the Hero seemed almost divine the way he was floating high up, striking awe into the hearts of the beholders.

Not even a scratch on his armor. However, the fact that he used Healing Magic means at least some damage got through to him.

The audience were absolutely smitten with this figure in orichalcum armor who looked like a messenger from the Divine Realm. In the eyes of this world, teetering on the edge of complete annihilation by the Demon Lord Army as it was, the Hero was truly the hope of all humanity.

I wonder how much HP we shaved off just now. Anyway, my analysis is largely complete. I think I have a pretty good estimate of the Hero's stats.

Helmios's Cumulative Stats (Status, Class Skill Boost, Equipment)
Attack: 10,400 (2,400 + 3,000 + 5,000)
Endurance: 10,400 (2,400 + 3,000 + 5,000)
Agility: 8,400 (2,400 +3,000 + 3,000)

Our Agility is about the same, and I'm completely behind in the other stats. He's most likely wearing Agility-boosting equipment too. Did he want to beat me that badly?

"Well, that was dangerous..." Helmios grumbled from up in the sky, much higher than even where Dora was hovering.

"Why did you say that like the match is over?" Allen asked in feigned confusion from where he was standing on the arena stage. "We've only just gotten started."

"Ha ha ha! What're you saying? Your attacks won't reach me anymore, Allen. I can fly pretty fast, I'll have you know."

"And what are *you* saying? I actually want to *thank* you for taking to the sky."

"What?"

Allen thrust a hand forward, smiling. "Wallys, Explode!"

Ten Stone Es abruptly appeared around the Hero, promptly turned red, and went off in one massive explosion. Allen had carefully calculated the distance and concluded that this midair explosion would not affect anyone in the spectator stands. However, there was no way for the audience to know this, so they screamed all the same. The second- and third-year students who had already raised their levels to a certain degree remained unfazed by a little gust of hot wind, but the various aristocrats already had their guards standing protectively in front of them—in fact, they had been there ever since the dragon first appeared.

"Dear esteemed guests, we ask that you please calm down!" the headmaster called through the loudspeaker system, desperately trying to reassure the crowd.

Eventually, the smoke blew away and Helmios came back into sight.

"Ouch. That actually hurt, Allen."

"I did say it, didn't I? That you'll be spared pain if you just hand over the ring."

Okay, good, he cast Healing Magic on himself again. That means this attack also works on him. Quick Summoning is really proving its worth here.

One more time, Allen called out ten more Strengthened Stone Es. In the instant it took Helmios to recognize them, they glowed red and exploded once again.

Someone in Normal Mode could only raise their class skill to Lvl. 6, meaning they could only possess a maximum of six skills. However, when Allen reached Summoning Lvl. 7, he had obtained two new skills.

One of them was Quick Summoning, which he had been using to attack Helmios with. Up till now, the processes of Creation, Synthesis, and Strengthening had all taken roughly half a second, according to Allen's internal clock. Being able to Create a Summon in under a second was quite amazing, but the higher his Summoning became, the more complicated it

became to create the newer Summons, with all the iterations of Creation and Synthesis adding up to quite a bit of time.

His new skill, Quick Summoning, greatly shortened the duration of all of his Summoning skills. Whereas a Spirit-type Summon used to require, from Creation to Strengthening and Awakening, around ten seconds, that time was now cut down to practically nothing. It did not matter if he was making ten Summons—twenty, even—it now happened almost instantaneously.

All Allen had to do was focus on a mental image of which Summon he wanted, how many, and in what position they should appear, then—*voilà!* If he wanted to recall them, he just had to imagine it and the Summons would all return to their card holders. He felt like he had been entirely freed of the time constraints tied to Summoning.

There was one issue he had to be aware of, however: just as before, he still needed to expend MP and magic stones to make new Summons. As such, he would be helpless if he were to run out of either. Even so, the skill was just so useful that Allen considered it a sign he had surpassed Normal Mode.

The other new skill, Deputize, was the first skill that came sealed. When Allen, who was currently Lvl. 55, had attempted to use it, the follow message appeared:

`<You do not have the requisite level for using Deputize.>`

Allen had no idea exactly what level he needed to be at in order to use the spell, but he was eager to see it in action.

As Allen was occupied thinking about his skills, Helmios appeared from within the cloud of fire, charging straight at Allen. The Hero had clearly come to the conclusion that keeping his distance only made him a sitting duck. Just as he had said, he was quick and mobile in the air.

Allen dodged the incoming sword slash, then backed away in order to maintain a certain distance from Helmios. Now that he knew Stone Es were effective against the Hero, there was no longer any need for him to continue fighting at close quarters.

“Come on out, Cerby! Keep the Hero busy!”

“Yes, Master!”

When Allen called its name, a giant wolf with three heads rivaling the dragon in size appeared, prompting someone in the audience to scream, “A cerberus has joined the dragon!” The Beast B Summon rushed toward the Hero, the vicious fangs in all three maws glinting dangerously.

Go on, choose either me or Cerby.

The Beast B’s stats were only around a third of the Hero’s. So when Helmios targeted the wolf, Allen stopped running away and turned around to attack him as well, tag teaming with his Summons. Then, when Helmios tried to create some distance, he found Stone Es waiting for him instead. Eventually, Helmios defeated Dragon B and Beast B, but Allen immediately called out replacements.

However, every time he got hurt, the Hero healed himself back up. Allen did the same, only with items instead of magic. After this dogged fighting continued for a while, Helmios suddenly lowered his weapon.

"This isn't getting us anywhere."

Allen backed up a step. "You mean you're gonna surrender? Good fight, then." He had no attachment to the fight itself, so he would not mind it at all if Helmios were to throw in the towel now.

"Ha ha ha, of course not! I mean, I'm gonna put an end to this match. If *you* want to surrender, now's the time to do it. After all, if you're unlucky, you could actually die from this next move."

"So you're a comedian too, I see!" Allen laughed provocatively, waving a hand to dismiss Helmios's words. There was no way he would surrender. Looks like that's my confirmation that the Hero's fourth skill is an attack one. All right, gimme your best shot. I'll teach you how I defeat Heroes.

So far, Helmios had demonstrated three skills: Analyze, Healing, and Flight. Therefore, Allen was sure that one of the remaining ones must be an offensive skill.

"Well, you asked for it. Just saying right now, I can't really hold back when I use this."

The Hero gripped his sword tighter, still maintaining his smile. The blade with a golden glow suddenly lit up as if something incredible was being gathered within it. Allen held up his own sword at the ready, flanked on both sides by his Summons.

"Oh? You're gonna block it?" Helmios asked, sounding genuinely surprised. When his sword grew blindingly bright, he shouted, "Phoenix Blade!" and abruptly charged forward at breakneck speed.

"Dora! Cerby! NOW!" Allen cried, quickly turning tail and running. Dragon B and Beast B stepped forward to meet the Hero, roaring furiously.

"Ha ha ha! Now that's the Allen I know! You can't trick me!"

A swing of the glowing orichalcum sword was all that was needed to reduce the Dragon B into bubbles of light. Beast B attempted to get in an attack while the Hero was occupied, but it, too, was defeated without much more effort. Helmios continued closing in on the retreating Allen as if to not give him time to call out any more Summons.

It was basically impossible to directly look at Helmios's sword anymore. He was clearly pouring every drop of his power into this single attack.

The arena stage was only fifty meters long on each edge. As he had demonstrated when he saved Krena from Dverg, this was a distance that Helmios could traverse in the blink of an eye.

Hah! Fool, you misjudged how fast my Summoning works!

Thanks to Quick Summoning, Allen could call out Summons in no time at all. The process was so fast that in the instant just before Krena was about to land her attack on him, he had been able to Summon a Stone C behind her back and have it use Substitute to shoulder all the damage for him.

Just as Helmios was about to close in, a gleaming suit of full-body armor that towered ten meters high appeared between him and Allen. This Summon, a Stone B, braced with its massive round shield in front of it, indicating its intention on taking Helmios’s strike head-on. Helmios, for his part, discerned with one glance that this was a Summon specialized for defense and decided to cut his way past, swinging his powered-up sword with all the power he could muster.

When the orichalcum sword smashed against the shield that covered nearly half of Stone B’s entire body, a shower of sparks and a deafening boom erupted. Cracks ran along the shield, quickly spreading to the rest of the Summon’s body.

However, even though Helmios expected it to immediately disappear—it certainly seemed at risk of crumbling at any moment—the glow that enveloped his sword suddenly disappeared and reappeared around the shield.

“Well done bearing it, Mirror! Now, REFLECT!”

CRAAAAAASH!

Like a jet engine blasting to life, the round shield held by the Summon named Mirror blasted all the damage it had just taken straight back at Helmios. The shock wave of blinding light slammed directly into the Hero’s face, blowing him backward with enough force to rip up much of the stone arena behind him.

It was a merciless attack from him—someone said to possess the most powerful Status of all of humanity wielding a sword made of the world’s strongest material, orichalcum. All that combined with the world’s one and only Hero’s attack skill, no less.

Allen had been waiting for all these conditions to fall into place. He was fighting with a sword, but he did not possess any skills to use with it. At the same time, his opponent was so powerful that he had barely been hurt after even taking Dragon B’s Awakened Ability directly. And so, Allen had focused on creating the perfect situation for Stone B’s Ability to shine.

As I’d thought, there’s nothing better for defeating a hero than the hero’s own attack. Well done, Mirror.

Although Stone B could not talk, it still managed to convey a sense of pride. Its Ability, Reflect, basically absorbed physical damage and sent it back out as an attack. While this Summon was using its Ability, its Endurance would be doubled, but it still would take damage. If the incoming damage was beyond what it was able to withstand and it was defeated, then its Ability would not activate.

Allen marveled at how much Stone B’s HP had been depleted as he used a recovery item to top it back up to full. The cracks in the shield and armor started fading away as the metal pulled itself back together with loud screeches.

Now then, is it over?

At the far end of the arena, Helmios lay on the ground spread-eagle. A closer look revealed he was simply looking up at the sky as if he was just sunbathing.

"Simply incredible. I'd been waiting for this kind of opportunity all this time..."

He had figured out that he had been instigated into using his skill. Despite the terrible blow he had just suffered, he was so happy that there was a big grin on his face.

"What're you gonna do?" Allen asked. "If you don't surrender, I'll just continue throwing your attacks back at you. If you give me your MP Recovery Ring, though, I'm willing to let you off the hook."

The speed at which Allen could call out Summons was overwhelmingly faster than Helmios's movement speed. What was more, Mirror could reflect normal physical attacks as well as skills. Now that Allen was sure Helmios did not possess any Attack Magic, he was confident he could repel everything the Hero had to throw his way.

"That sounds scary, all right. Ha ha ha! I see, I see. That's good. That's really good."

"What is?"

Allen could not understand why Helmios looked so happy despite the situation.

"Turns out the Sovereign of Spirits was right after all. So there *is* still hope for humanity after all."

Huh? Don't people call him the hope of humanity? Why does he sound like he only just found it?

The light of Healing Magic enveloped Helmios's prone body, regenerating his HP back up. Then he slowly stood up and faced Allen.

"What? You still wanna fight?" Allen asked.

"Of course. It's my job to teach you that there is always someone better, after all."

"Oh, no, there's no need. I am already fully aware of that fact. Omigosh, oh esteemed Hero, you're so powerful!"

C'mon, just hand over the ring already. We can both recover our HP and MP, so any further fighting is just gonna be a waste of magic stones. Do you know how many I've already used up today?

"Ha ha ha! You sure don't change, do you, Allen? Now, don't say that—take a good look this time. This is the greatest strike that humanity is capable of."

Suddenly, a heat haze sprung up around Helmios's body.

Why? Why're you doing this? What, you're like Dverg? Are you a bad loser too? So now I've gotta deal with the Hero's Extra Skill? I did just heal Mirror back up, but I don't think two Steelys are gonna be enough. Will five—no, will ten do?

As Allen rapidly swapped out the cards in his holders, Helmios raised his sword. He then started running toward Allen.

“Take this! God Strike!”

Wait, hold on, are we not doing the “You gonna surrender?” exchange this time?!

Once again, a Stone B appeared in front of Helmios, but he slashed through it with little effort this time, not giving it any opportunity to activate Reflect.

“Ugh!” Allen raised his sword to block Helmios’s attack, but with his Extra Skill activated, Helmios sliced off both of Allen’s arms along with his weapon. The ten Stone Cs promptly disappeared into bubbles of light, having failed to take on all the damage that Allen suffered. The ground of the arena was shattered, leaving behind a huge crater.

“Oof...”

“So, how is it?! A serious attack from the Hero? You still alive, Allen?”

“Ugh... Yes, I’m alive.”

Okay, dragged-out fight it is. Guess I’m gonna have to pick up the ring from your corpse. Don’t expect mercy when you showed none yourself.

Allen’s grimoire materialized above his head, dropping a fruit-like item onto his head. The next instant, his arms regrew in a graphic display. Pieces of his equipment had either been ruined or were lying far away, so there was nothing he could do to recover them. He slowly got to his feet, glaring at Helmios.

“What was that? You recovered in a split second. Did you use an elven elixir?”

“Well, something like that,” Allen replied offhandedly, taking out a spare adamantite sword from Storage. It had actually been a recovery item made from a Grass-type Summon, but he was hardly going to go into the details. One made from Grass E could not heal lost limbs, but this one could.

Helmios’s eyes widened as he understood that Allen still very much intended on continuing the fight. “Huh? Why aren’t you giving up?”

“What do you mean why? I want your ring.”

What’s he saying after coming at me with his Extra Skill and all? Wait, don’t tell me he wants to renege on his promise?

“No, that’s not what I was asking. I just showed you how far apart our power levels were. Aren’t you going to give up?”

“If I always gave up the moment I realized an opponent’s stronger than me, where’s that gonna get me? It’s a given that my opponents are going to be stronger.”

Things had been the same in Allen’s previous life. He had always been the weaker one, and his opponents had always been stronger. And in order to get strong himself, he had to pour in the time and effort.

“What if...I told you that once you obtain power, all that you’ll find is despair?”

Allen stared at Helmios with a baffled look, not quite understanding what he was getting at. The smile that had been plastered on Helmios’s face for so long was now gone, replaced by an expression of earnest questioning.

I see. So he's been grappling with despair for years now.

As it turned out, Helmios's smile had been a mask to hide his own utter hopelessness. At the same time, it had also been to reassure those who had no choice but to cling to him as the so-called "hope of humanity."

"Helmios," Allen said, calling the Hero by his name for the first time, "I promise you that I will overcome that despair."

"Overcome...the despair? Is that even possible? Who...who are you?"

"You want to know who I am?"

"Yes, I do. Tell me." The Hero's eyes had reverted to that of a boy desperately seeking answers.

"I've heard that this Demon Lord calls himself Demon Lord of the End."

"He does indeed. And you?"

"If that's the case...then I am the Summoner of the Beginning."

I just came up with the title. Makes sense, since I'm the very first Summoner in this world. Plus, it sets me up as a foil to the Demon Lord.

"Summoner of the Beginning...Allen," Helmios repeated, as if considering each word. All of a sudden, he walked up to Allen, took something out from a pouch on his waist, and handed it over.

It was an MP Recovery Ring.

"What? Are you sure about this?"

Woo-hoo! I got the ring! Huh? So was the condition for receiving it withstanding his Extra Skill? Or is this the reward for putting up a good fight?

Allen wondered if he had misremembered what Helmios had said in the headmaster's office. When he checked his grimoire, however, he found "Defeat the Hero" clearly written there. In other words, he was not the one who had made a mistake.

"Of course. The Sovereign of Spirits told me to hand this ring to the Summoner of the Beginning, after all."

Got it, so the condition was to call myself "Summoner of the Beginning"!

Based on what Helmios said, the Sovereign of Spirits, Rohzen, had prophesied Allen's title in his sleep.

"But won't you need this when you're fighting on the front lines?" Allen asked. *I can't have you dying just because you gave me your ring.*

Helmios grinned and showed off another ring on his hand. "Look, now we're a match. This one was for 'Hero Helmios.' Rohzen is a pretty generous guy."

As it turned out, the Sovereign of Spirits had not created only one ring.

All right, I guess I'll help myself, then. Now that leaves me with only one thing to do.

Allen abruptly raised his hand, catching Helmios by surprise.

At the moment, they were being watched by a sizable audience including Allen's own companions. The crown prince and other aristocrats were huddled in their seats, desperately wanting to flee the venue but afraid of looking shameful in front of the foreign dignitaries. This had led to a

strange game of chicken where the noble spectators hid behind their guards, waiting for others to leave first. As a result, the large majority were still present and watching.

Helmios's Extra Skill had left a huge crater in the arena, but Allen and Helmios were still clearly in sight. The audience members who had been unable to keep up with what they had just witnessed returned to themselves and remembered where they were and what they had been watching. The sight of the black-haired boy raising one hand had all of them at the edge of their seats, and they waited with bated breath for what was coming next.

"I surrender," Allen called out in a flat voice as he made the submission gesture. "Damn, the Hero, am I right? I'm so tired, I can't fight a second more. Ugh, I was so close! This sucks so much!"

I no longer have a reason to fight, right? All right, that's a wrap, everyone!

Helmios stared blankly at Allen in confusion for a split second, then broke into a wry smile. "I guess you're you after all."

And so the match between Allen and Helmios ended as Helmios's victory. All the students, foreign dignitaries, aristocrats, and the crown prince could do was gape at the two standing on the thoroughly ruined stage, unable to understand what had just happened.



Chapter 17: Tournament Ceremony

One week had passed since Allen had lost to Helmios. With the tournament over, Allen had gone back to attending classes as normal, but the rest of the students' attitudes toward him had changed. Some were now scared and no longer talked to him, but far more now actively approached him. In this world where strength was justice, being able to go toe-to-toe with the Hero meant a lot.

Strangely, there had been no ceremony after the tournament. Normally, there would be one to applaud not only the champion, but all the contestants who managed to get into the top sixteen slots. Members of royalty and nobility would be invited, as would the foreign dignitaries in town. This was basically an occasion for these power brokers to recruit promising students to enter their service after returning from the battlefield. Krena had been approached by many nobles the previous year, but she had turned them all down, saying that she had a party to go home to.

Why was there no ceremony held this year? As it turned out, it was because Allen had gone and overdone it in his match with Helmios. Afterward, all the foreign dignitaries who had been present later swarmed the Academy, demanding explanation. Questions including "Who was that boy?" and "Why has Ratash kept him secret all this time?" were accompanied by reminders that "the Five Continent Alliance stipulates that all countries are to report whenever anyone more powerful than a Sword Lord is born." Each dignitary represented their own country in place of their respective heads of state, so neither Ratash nor the Academy could dismiss them out of hand. The royal palace of Ratash was naturally thrown into an enormous uproar. The ceremony was the furthest thing from everyone's mind.

Rifol had told Allen about the state of affairs in the palace, leaving him marveling at the other boy's information network once again. In any case, since so many countries were keeping a close watch on Ratash's next move, it was decided that the ceremony would be held at a later date.

After hearing everything, Allen only replied with a simple, "Okay." He had already accomplished his goal of obtaining an MP Recovery Ring, so he honestly could not care less about any of the politics. For him, this was an issue that was already over.

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After a significant delay, the date of the ceremony was finally decided. It would be held at one of the most prominent inns in Academy City. On the day of the ceremony, Allen and Krena left school early and made their way over.

Oh, it's the same one that Viscount Granvelle and I went to last year for that dinner with the crown prince. Does the crown prince stay here every time?

When the two of them walked in, they were led to a waiting room where they found the other finalist students waiting for the ceremony to start. Everyone greeted the two of them with great respect—even the third-year students.

Soon enough, an official in charge of the ceremony walked in. After confirming that everyone was present, he proceeded to explain how the night would proceed. He also gave them a few warnings, such as to not look directly at the crown prince and to not reply to anyone in a loud voice. It was expressly forbidden to bring any weapons into the ceremony hall, so all the students were subjected to a pat down to confirm that they were not carrying any concealed weapons. For some reason, two people were assigned to check Allen. The explanation and warnings continued on and on for another while, leaving some of the students quite nervous and frightened.

Finally, the official ended his speech, saying, "The ceremony will begin shortly. Make sure you do not disrespect any of the foreign dignitaries in any way." Worst-case scenario, impudence could lead to criminal charges.

After some more time passed, the students were eventually led to the ceremony hall, proceeding in a single-file line with the champion Allen at the head. The double doors opened up to reveal a venue that Allen recognized.

Oh, this is the room where the crown prince was eating dinner that time. Looks like they took away the huge table and converted it into a hall.

The first event of the evening was the crown prince bestowing a word of commendation upon the contestants, so the group of sixteen walked down the center of the room toward the far end where he was seated. They marched under the gaze of all the aristocrats and dignitaries lining both walls. The students were not allowed to look around, but Allen gleaned that there were about a hundred VIPs present. They all stared at Allen with curiosity, muttering among themselves.

"The black hair *is* rare, but up close, he just looks like an ordinary boy."

"Did he really make a dragon appear and fight for him?"

"He did. And keep your voice down."

Yes, take the last guy's advice. 'Cus I can hear all of you clear as day.

At the edge of his vision, Allen caught sight of Viscount Granvelle.

Hey, the viscount's here too.

Allen's group approached the round pattern on the carpet five meters away from the crown prince, just as they had been instructed by the official earlier, when the crown prince suddenly shouted at them.

"N-No closer! Stop there!"

Although things were different from what they had been told, the students obediently dropped to their knees on the spot where they stood.

The knight standing behind the crown prince whispered, “Please don’t agitate them too much, Your Highness. This place is not entirely safe.”
“I-I know,” the crown prince replied in an equally soft voice.
From his position at the front of the procession, Allen had managed to hear the exchange clearly. Seeing as how there were a lot more knights surrounding the crown prince now than there had been for last year’s dinner, Allen realized that the crown prince had grown quite scared of him after seeing his fight the other day.
Let’s hurry it up, please. I really want to get back into the dungeons and see how well my new Summons can do against the dragon.
Thanks to obtaining Summoning Lvl. 7, Allen now had much higher stats as well as access to Rank B Summons. He could not wait to try fighting the dragon-type boss that his group had encountered in January again, only this time without relying on Krena’s Extra Skill.
The master of ceremony proclaimed, “We will now have a word from His Highness the Crown Prince,” prompting Allen and the students to lower their heads even deeper.
“All of you fought well. The Kingdom of Ratash is glad to have warriors as strong as you. Continue training and honing yourselves for the sake of your country.”
The students all chorused, “Thank you, Your Highness!”
Okay, done! Can I go home now? I’m glad he didn’t drone on and on like my middle school principal did.
Unfortunately, contrary to Allen’s expectations, the order to leave the hall did not come. Silence filled the room.
Uh, what is this? What’re we waiting for?
Allen’s desire to leave welled up within. Meanwhile, the tension was palpable as the nobles and dignitaries hung on to the crown prince’s next words.
Under the eyes of everyone who was waiting to see how the kingdom would choose to handle this champion, the crown prince cleared his throat.
“Ahem. Er…Allen, that was an impressive fight.”
Allen bowed gracefully. “I am most grateful, Your Highness. I’m afraid I got a bit overzealous being in your presence,” he replied, placing emphasis on “a bit overzealous” and “in your presence.”
Hope that’s enough as an excuse for destroying the arena stage.
“I-Is that so. Your display surprised me greatly, as Viscount Granvelle had not reported that he had such an exemplary subordinate.”
The crown prince purposefully spoke loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. He clearly recognized Allen as the boy who had stood behind Viscount Granvelle during the dinner last year. He was implying that Ratash did not know about Allen in the first place and was shoving the blame onto Viscount Granvelle.

Upon suddenly being called by name, the viscount, who was standing with the other nobles, replied with confusion in his voice, “My...subordinate, Your Highness?”

“Hm? Is he not your subordinate?”

“He is not, Your Highness. Allen is a guest of House Granvelle.”

“A guest, you say. Is this true, Allen?” The crown prince’s eyes seemed to be questioning why Allen wore the outfit of a servant if he was not one.

“Yes, Your Highness. House Granvelle had indeed accepted me as a guest. The viscount has been more than generous with me, so I do a little work for him sometimes.”

Both the crown prince and viscount echoed aloud, “Work?” The latter struggled to recall what work Allen had done for him as the former asked, “What manner of work?”

“Bodyguard work, Your Highness. As there had been signs of suspicious activity around the viscount’s household these past few years.”

The viscount choked on his saliva. “Wh— Allen?!”

The crown prince had chided the viscount for doing so last time, but this time, he did not even spare the viscount a glance. The word “bodyguard” had set all the aristocrats in the room abuzz with furious whispers. Most associated Viscount Granvelle with the so-called House Granvelle Affair, an incident several years back where he had used the rights of newly developed mithril mines within his fiefdom to forcibly trigger the purge of a whole swathe of nobles who had been plotting against him as well as numerous royal envoys who had been complicit. The fact that Allen was using the word “bodyguard” here implied that the viscount had taken Allen in as a guest in order to protect himself and to remove anyone in his way with force should the need arise.

The crown prince gulped audibly as he realized that Allen had accompanied the viscount as a guard under the guise of a servant when they met the previous year. Several of the knights behind him also unconsciously took half a step backward, even though the person they were supposed to be protecting, the crown prince, was there in front of them. They could not help trembling inside their armor as they imagined what might have happened had things turned sour in this very room one year prior.

“Th-That’s reassuring to hear. It is admirable to protect a noble so valuable and well-regarded in our country.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. In order to repay one favor with another, I have every intention of protecting the viscount from *anyone* with nefarious intentions toward him.”

The crown prince felt faint when he heard “anyone,” but managed to keep himself together, albeit barely.

Thus the tournament ceremony this year ended with Allen clarifying his position to the crown prince of Ratash.

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It was now early December. The development of the new village under Village Chief Rodin was progressing smoothly. They had already finished erecting the walls around the village and had started hunting for great boars within their very first year.

The White Dragon Mountains stretched far to both the north and the south, and their foothills were expansive. The great boar population within those foothills was usually quite sizable, but it had ballooned even further the past few years. Allen’s wiping out the goblins and orcs that would have normally hunted the great boars had ended up significantly altering the local ecosystem.

Thanks to the hihiirokane and mithril spears that Allen and his friends had paid for together, the villagers had managed to take down twenty great boars. They would be enjoying a bountiful diet with plenty of meat this winter, restoring their energy with lots of nutrients in preparation for tilling their fields come springtime.

The No-life Gamers were currently inside one of the Rank A dungeons within Academy City. Naturally, they were on the deepest floor.

“Phew, it’s finally down,” Cecil sighed.

Before their eyes was the dragon-type boss lying on its side and about to breathe its last. The party had just defeated it without relying on Krena’s Extra Skill.

“Oh hey, I leveled up!” Meruru cried, raising both arms in celebration.

“Congratulations,” Allen replied. “You’re Lvl. 58 now.”

Due to Allen’s frequent usage of gaming terms from his previous life, his party members had also started to follow suit. Meruru had gotten used to referring to Trials of the Gods as “levels.”

[redacted]

Name: Meruru
Age: 14
Class: Talos General
Level: 58
HP: 1,621
MP: 2,340
Attack: 756
Endurance: 1,274
Agility: 756
Intelligence: 2,340
Luck: 1,453
Skills: Talos General {1}, Rocket Punch {1}, Spear Mastery {3}, Shield Mastery {3}
Extra Skill: Union (Right Arm)
XP: 80,240/40,000,000
Skill LevelsRocket Punch: 1
Skill ExperienceRocket Punch: 0/10

[redacted]

Am I just imagining it, or does Meruru's Status make it seem like she's playing a totally different genre of game all by herself?

In order to use her skills, Meruru needed to ride a golem. Unfortunately, there were no golems in Academy City, so there was no way for her to expend her MP and gain Skill XP. This was why her class-related skills all remained at Lvl. 1.

Just like the elves Sophie and Volmaar, Meruru had come to the Ratashian Academy as a part of the arrangements of the Five Continent Alliance. The northern part of the Central Continent had, apart from elven squads, golems on loan from the Empire of Baukis. Their numbers were far fewer than the elves, but each golem unit possessed enough strength to easily slaughter Rank A monsters.

The tokusatsu TV shows that Allen had watched in his previous life came to mind. When it came to robots with parts that could combine with each other, he had always thought the head part was the coolest.

"WHOAAA! A GOLD CHEST! I guess the chance of it appearing is higher after killing the dragon boss!"

Right after the dragon died, the reward appeared in its place. Keel did the exact same thing he did one year ago when the party last saw a gold chest. When they opened it up, they found a ring resting within.

Aww, we would've preferred an orichalcum weapon. Specifically, a greatsword or ax.

Through his fight with the Hero, Allen had obtained the MP Recovery Ring that he had sought for so long. As a result, rings had plummeted in his list of priorities when it came to dungeon drops. What he now wanted were weapons that would boost his party members' attack power—preferably, ones for Krena or Dogora first. He had, based on his own Attack stats, derived a general idea for how much extra Attack each grade of weapons material provided.

Estimate of the Bonus Attack from Swords

- Steel Sword: 100
- Mithril Sword: 500
- Hihiirokane Sword: 1,000
- Adamantite Sword: 3,000
- Orichalcum Sword: 5,000+

The actual damage value inflicted with each blow could be affected significantly by things like aiming for an opponent's weak spot, having greater speed, and the attacker's skill levels. Given this, the numbers above were based purely on bonuses from the swords.

Without hesitation, Keel put on the gold ring. "Which stat did it alter?"

Allen checked his grimoire. "Whoa, it increased your MP by 1,000!"

I can use this. If I have both an MP Increase Ring and an MP Recovery Ring, it would help me reach Summoning Lvl. 8 that much faster.

With that, every member of the No-life Gamers had completed five Rank A dungeons. Just as Allen was chatting with Keel about who to give the ring to, a familiar voice rang in all their ears.

Fwum.

"I am the Executive Dungeon System. Congratulations, No-life Gamers. I am here to update your Rank A dungeon clearance card."

"Ah, it's here." Cecil had gotten so used to the dungeon cubes' sudden appearances that they no longer surprised her.

Allen checked the jet-black card in his possession and realized that it already bore five marks.

"All members of your party have fulfilled the required conditions, so I will now convert your clearance card into a Rank S dungeon invitation card."

As everyone crowded around to peer at the card in Allen's hand, the five marks merged into one.

"Does this mean we can now go to the Rank S dungeon?" Allen asked.

"Yes, you can."

"Can you tell us where it is?"

"Within the Tower of Tribulation in Yanpany."

Uh, where the heck is that?

The Academy's curriculum had covered geography, but Allen did not recognize that name. It seemed to ring a bell for Meruru, however.

She asked the cube, "Are you talking about the giant tower in Yanpany?"

"The very one. The Rank S dungeon is within the temple in Yanpany."

Everyone turned to look at Meruru in surprise. Cecil asked, "You know it, Meruru?"

"Mm-hm," Meruru nodded. "The cube is talking about the massive temple where Lord Dygragni lives. If I remember right"—she looked up into the air as if trying to remember something—"it's in the northeastern part of the Empire. I've never been, though."

"By 'the Empire,' you're referring to Baukis?" Cecil pressed.

"Yep! Yanpany is the name of the region northeast of the imperial capital."

So the Rank S dungeon is in Baukis?

"Aww, so we can't go right away?" Krena looked deflated. She was particularly disappointed because she and Allen had talked about how they wanted to go to the Rank S dungeon soon now that he had reached Summoning Lvl. 7.

And here I was, hoping that a warp gate or something would appear at the bottom of Rank A dungeons that directly connected to the Rank S dungeon.

For those who had already reached the level cap but wanted to get even stronger, obtaining orichalcum weapons was absolutely necessary. The Hero had said that the Rank S dungeon was where orichalcum items could be found, so there was no getting around the fact that they would be challenging the Rank S dungeon eventually.

Cecil sighed. “Sounds like it’ll be out of our reach for quite a while yet, then”

Suddenly, Allen started as if an idea had occurred to him. “What if we all transfer to Baukis for our third year? That way, Meruru might be able to get herself a golem too.”

“Is that even possible?” Dogora frowned.

“No idea. Maybe we can ask the headmaster?”

“Leave it to me,” Sophie interrupted. “I’ll try asking Theodojiil to make the arrangements.”

It was currently December, so there still ought to have been sufficient time to arrange a transfer by the start of the next school year in April. And so the No-life Gamers agreed to set heading to Baukis in order to get their hands on orichalcum weapons as their next goal. All of them were equally eager to set foot in the temple in Yanpany that housed the dungeon as soon as possible.

“I am sorry to interrupt your conversation, but there is one more thing I must inform you of.”

The cube that had been standing by all this time suddenly spoke up.

“Huh?” Allen turned around. “Um, what is it?” *What else could there be?*

“If you manage to successfully clear the Rank S dungeon in Yanpany, your invitation card will turn into a challenge card for the Dungeon Master.”

“FWOOOOO!!! IT’S A HIDDEN BOSS! DYGRAGNI GETS IT!” Allen clenched both his fists and whooped loudly, surprising all his friends.

On behalf of the party leader who seemed beside himself with excitement, Cecil asked the cube in confirmation, “Do you mean we can fight the Dungeon Master?”

“Yes, you can.”

“What happens if we win? What are we fighting for?”

“That is something the Dungeon Master will only tell those who win.”

Oh my god, he won’t tell us! It’s perfect! That’s exactly the way it should be! Allen grinned at his friends. “Looks like we have no choice but to clear the Rank S dungeon after all!”

In stark contrast with Krena, who got caught up in Allen’s excitement, Cecil sighed. “There he goes again.”

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The Kingdom of Ratash greeted the new year with solemnity and soberness. The king, whose health had been in constant decline, had passed away at the end of the previous year. The whole kingdom entered a period

of mourning during which all functions were called to a halt. The economy stagnated as the citizens became restrained in every area of life, and all stores—save essential ones such as restaurants—shuttered their doors. Even the dungeons were closed.

Once the mourning period ended, as expected, the crown prince ascended the throne. According to Rifol, the coronation ceremony was going to be a massive affair. Allen, however, did not really care who sat on the throne.

A month had passed since the No-life Gamers learned that the Rank S dungeon was in Baukis. The headmaster had already begun the process for their transfer to the empire, but he needed to go through Baukis in order to contact the Academy within their borders, so there was no guarantee whether the request would be approved. Allen and his friends were still waiting to hear back.

Academy City had not observed Ratash's mourning; it had been business as usual inside the city. Today, Allen was once again converting magic stones into Fronds of Life and Seeds of Magic during his morning classes. Thanks to the Quick Summoning skill he had obtained from leveling his class skill to Lvl. 7, he could now simultaneously Summon *all* the cards in the holders of his grimoire at the same time. Progress went remarkably faster than before.

His MP Recovery Ring recovered one percent of his max MP every second, so his MP gauge could fill back up in no time at all. Allen was using his skills every waking moment in order to not waste a single drop of MP, but if not for Quick Summoning significantly boosting the number of skills he could use and the amount of MP he could expend at once, his spirit might have cracked under the never-ending task.

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard pounding down the hallway.

BANG!

The door to the classroom opened with such force that it seemed like it had been kicked open. Both the teacher and students all froze in surprise.

Oh, it's just Carlova.

When Allen turned toward the door, his eyes locked with Carlova's. Without so much as a by-your-leave from the teacher, Carlova shouted while gasping for breath, "Allen! Your entire party! To the headmaster's! NOW!"

What's got him so flustered? He's asking for my entire party?

"Looks like we're being summoned." Cecil gracefully stood up. All the No-life Gamers immediately followed Carlova to the headmaster's office.

"I've brought 'em! Now brief 'em!"

He's completely reverted to being an adventurer, Allen thought as he and his friends entered the room.

"Ohhhh, there you are!" The headmaster had a world map spread over his table. Even this man, who was normally calm and composed due to having lived a thousand years, seemed frazzled. After greeting Allen's group, he fell silent.

After a while, Allen, who could not bear it any longer, asked, “How may we help you?” *What’s with this pause?*

The headmaster shot a look at Sophie for an instant as if he was struggling to find the right words to say. “I’ll…come right out with it. There’s been a request to dispatch you, Allen.”

“To the battlefield, sir?”

For a split second, Allen had thought the headmaster was telling them that their application to Baukis had been accepted. However, that would not be called a “dispatch.” The only place that fit the usage of that word was the battlefield.

“That’s right. Rohzenheim has put in an official request through the Five Continent Alliance for you to be dispatched, Allen. And Ratash has accepted that request.” The headmaster spread a royal decree out on the table that specifically named Allen, Krena, Cecil, Dogora, and Keel.

That’s a royal decree, all right. The headmaster called it a “request,” but we don’t really have the right to refuse, do we?

Ever since he enrolled, Allen had always assumed he would be eventually deployed to the northern border of Giamut, the area that used to belong to fallen countries such as Rastuli.

“Um, does that mean we’re being ordered to go to Rohzenheim?”

“That’s right,” the headmaster replied, lowering his gaze to the world map. “The fate of Rohzenheim is currently hanging in the balance.”

“What do you mean?!” Sophie exclaimed.

“According to intel,” the headmaster said, “the Demon Lord Army is currently attacking all three northern continents at the same time with a force of ten million in total.”

“Ten million?!” Sophie was so shocked by the number that she seemed about to faint.

He’s referring to the Central Continent, plus Rohzenheim and Baukis, I take it? And as always, nothing’s heading toward the two continents in the south. Hmm, ten million, huh?

Allen rubbed his chin. “That number is five to ten times the Army’s usual numbers each year, right?”

According to what he had learned in Demon Lord history, the Demon Lord Army had simultaneously attacked all three northern continents before, but it only sent around one or two million troops each year, half of which would head for the Central Continent while the elves and dwarves dealt with a quarter each.

The headmaster nodded. “We don’t know how long they’ve been doing so, but they’ve apparently been building up their strength for this. They now have more than enough numbers to wipe Rohzenheim off the map.”

Which means all the ground that the Alliance regained over the past few years wasn’t solely because of Helmios. The Demon Lord Army’s been reserving its forces for this large-scale assault on Rohzenheim.

The situation on the front lines had changed ever since the Hero Helmios appeared eight years ago. As such, he was touted as the sign of hope that humanity had found after over half a century of sustained losses. Since then, the Demon Lord Army had been on the back foot for the past eight years; as it turned out, however, there were other forces at play.

Sophie, who had been listening quietly all this time, finally burst out: “Theodojiil, what did you mean when you said that the fate of Rohzenheim is hanging in the balance? And this urgent dispatch— Wait, don’t tell me!”

However, the headmaster was unable to answer her. His words were caught in his throat.

“Answer me, Theodojiil!” Sophie demanded, her usual coolheaded demeanor nowhere to be seen. She leaned forward, her eyes blazing fervently. “Is Her Majesty safe?!”

She calls her mother “Her Majesty”?

The elves worshiped Rohzen, the Sovereign of Spirits, but they loved and adored their queen with just as much reverence. She was the one whom they fought for.

Pressured into answering, the headmaster managed to stammer, “I’m afraid...there’s been no word.”

“Th-That can’t be possible! What’s happened to Fortenia?! Tell me everything!” Sophie was frustrated with how the headmaster had only been able to answer questions she posed to him directly. Fortenia was the capital of Rohzenheim, the city where the queen’s residence was.

“According to intel from three days ago, Fortenia has already fallen to a demon host of three million. No one knows where Her Majesty currently is.”

“This can’t be...” Sophie crumpled to her knees.

Volmaar rushed forward to catch her. “Princess Sophialohne!”

The headmaster turned toward Allen. “Seventy percent of the country has already fallen to the Demon Lord Army. The remaining forces gathered in the southern part of Rohzenheim are currently preparing for the final fight.”

Even considering the size of the invading force, this advance seemed way too fast.

“And I’m supposed to go there?”

“Yes. Please accept this dispatch request.”

“Just curious, how’s the battle situation on the Central Continent?”

Allen wanted to know what the situation was in Giamut, given that Rohzenheim was in danger of being wiped out. However, the headmaster again failed to provide an answer immediately.

“Huh? Is the front line collapsing there too?”

“N-No, not quite. In fact, the fighting has yet to begin. The Demon Lord Army, which is two million strong, is on standby about ten days by horseback from the northernmost fortresses.”

When they heard this, the Gamers all gasped under their breaths, “Two million!”

Hold on, ‘standby’? Why don’t they just press the atta— Hold on. What about the elven squads?

“I’m sorry, sir; have the elven squads at the Giamut border been informed of the situation in Rohzenheim? You just mentioned there are forces gathering in the south?”

Sensing that Allen had hit upon a crucial issue, Sophie doubled down on his question. “Theodojiil, answer him. What is the current situation of the elven squads assigned to the Central Continent?!”

“The squads...are currently returning to Rohzenheim.”

The elves normally provided much-needed healing to the front lines in Giamut, which often saw a dire shortage of those with healing Talents. Now, however, all those elves were retreating to protect their home country.

Cecil blurted, “But it’s impossible for the forces at Giamut to fend off an army of two million without the support of the elves!”

Having analyzed the situation, Allen put it plainly. “The Demon Lord Army at the Central Continent is planning on launching a massive offensive once the healers have fully left the scene. That’s why they’re only standing by at the moment.”

“That...is very likely the case,” the headmaster admitted. “However, and I’m very sorry to ask this, but please answer the dispatch and save Rohzenheim. Please...save our queen.” For the first time, the headmaster, who was himself a member of royalty, lowered his head to Allen. He was pleading with Allen despite fully understanding what would likely happen to the Central Continent.

Cecil looked to Allen anxiously. “Allen, what’re we gonna do?!”

At the end of Allen’s second year at school, the Demon Lord Army suddenly showed up with a massive force, bent on destroying the entire world in one momentous push. Everyone present—Allen’s companions, his homeroom teacher, and the headmaster—held their breath, hanging on his next words.

“We will go to Rohzenheim,” Allen replied decisively.

And so it was decided that the No-life Gamers would be heading to Rohzenheim, the country of elves on the very brink of obliteration by the Demon Lord Army.

Short Story 1: Helmios’s Past

The Hero, Helmios, was currently on the battlefield, deep within enemy lines much further north than the northernmost Alliance fortresses.

“To think that I, a Demonic Deity, would fall to a mere human...”

Helmios’s orichalcum sword plunged deep into his opponent’s chest. He had just successfully taken out one of the Demon Lord Army’s generals who had been commanding a massive force of monsters. The huge demon fell over backward, his body creating a dull boom as it hit the ground—he was dead.

One of Helmios’s companions, a redheaded female Sword Lord armed with a greatsword, cheered. “We actually did it... We killed the general! Our strategy worked!”

“Looks like it,” Helmios replied, his shoulders heaving violently with each word. He turned to take in his entire party. “Anissa, everyone, thank you.”

With the Hero as their leader and at least a Sword Lord and a Saintess on their roster, this party of ten was undoubtedly the most powerful that humanity could muster. Together, they had fought the Demon Lord Army more than a few times now, and each time they had pulled through with power, brawn, and strategy, just as they did today.

“Liktina, sorry, but can you heal us up now, please?” Anissa asked her former Academy classmate, looking like someone who had just finished a big job.

The Saintess nodded. “Sure, let me cast it now.”

The fierce battle with the Demonic Deity had left everyone with wounds from head to toe, but Liktina’s wide-area Healing Magic mended them back up in no time at all.

“I’m glad we pulled it off somehow.” Helmios sighed with relief that his party had successfully killed one of the generals of the Demon Lord Army. However, his joy did not last long. A brooding look soon returned to his face.

“C’mon, Helmios! Don’t worry—I’m sure the front lines are holding up just fine.” Anissa slapped him on the back several times in encouragement.

“I suppose so, Anissa. The fortresses must be managing. Let’s hurry back.”

The details of their mission today had been decided during a prior Five Continent Alliance strategy meeting. Fighting on the front lines usually consisted of amassing troops at the border fortresses to beat back the tides of the Demon Lord Army horde; this time, however, the Alliance had agreed on a strategy involving a small group of elites who would infiltrate deep into hostile land in order to assassinate the enemy general.

The commanders of the Army were often either demons or Demonic Deities, whose power was equal to Ranks A and S respectively when

compared to the monster troops they led. Demonic Deities were so overwhelmingly strong that even Helmios struggled when fighting them.

To give him an edge, Elmea, the God of Creation, had given Helmios a special Extra Skill. Going by the name God Strike, the attack dealt holy elemental damage, which was extremely effective against demons and even Demonic Deities as powerful as Rank S monsters. As long as it landed, a blow with God Strike guaranteed death—that was just how powerful of a trump card this was. It was because of this skill that Helmios was called the "hope of humanity."

The reason why Helmios now looked so worried despite having just succeeded in their mission was because he could not stop thinking about the fortresses: they now had to fend for themselves without him or anyone in his party's presence. They were in the thick of battle at this very moment, and were likely having a tough time without the support from "the most powerful that humanity could muster."

And so Helmios's party rushed back to the front lines as fast as they could.

Several days later, they arrived to find one of the fortresses already fallen. When the Demon Lord Army conquered a fortress, they slaughtered everyone inside, never bothering to take hostages. Not a single being was left moving within the compound aside from the monsters making a mess as they gorged themselves on human remains.

After they had finished wiping out all the monsters in the fortress, Helmios asked his party in a monotone voice, "Just...how much longer do we have to keep doing this?"

"Until the Demon Lord is killed, duh," Anissa replied.

Lying before Helmios was a large number of human corpses, desperation and terror still etched on their faces—if they still had faces, that is. He felt like their eyes were accusing him, begrudging him for not being here, not being enough. Most soldiers sent to the battlefield had yet to reach twenty—they were but teenagers: so young, so full of promise. Helmios shuddered to consider exactly how many such lives had been shed like rainwater here on the front lines over the years.

No matter how many fortresses he protected, it never seemed to affect the Demon Lord Army's advances. However, when he went off to strike down an enemy general, a fortress still fell, leading to the deaths of thousands. And no matter how many fortresses fell, no matter how many soldiers died, no matter how much blood Helmios and his companions spilled, the leaders of the Five Continent Alliance would still trumpet to the world that their strategy was a success. Their reports to their home nations would contain only one line: the Hero defeated an enemy general.

After continuous defeats over decades, after losing so much, the people needed hope. If there was no hope, the quivering new soldiers would be unable to fight. The contradiction in his role as the so-called "hope of humanity" was hardly lost on Helmios.

A short while later, Helmios received his next mission: he was to head into enemy territory to take on another general. Because the plan had gone so well last time, the Five Continent Alliance had decided to have him execute it again.

At the time, the next wave of monsters was already advancing on the front lines. Helmios entreated the general of the targeted fortress to hold on until his return, promising to complete his mission as soon as he could.

□ □ □

Helmios's party swiftly made their way through a forest across treacherous footing. This was a shortcut to the enemy general's hideout that the party's scout had risked his life to find. Soon they encountered a figure wearing a mask and a clown's outfit standing in their path as if he was supposed to meet them here.

He sniffed. "Took you a while. I've been waiting."

"Are you the general directing the Army's forces this time?" Helmios asked the man warily.

"That's right, Helmios! The name's Kyubel. I hope you remember it!" the man replied in a casual tone like he was speaking to a friend.

Anissa narrowed her eyes. "What's with this guy? He a clown? All dressed up in some weird costume." She seemed to be doubting whether Kyubel truly was the enemy commander.

"Don't let your guard down," Helmios warned. "He's a Demonic Deity."

"You know I won't. Wait, Demonic Deity? Another one?"

Just now, Helmios had attempted to use his Analyze skill on Kyubel, but to no avail; his skill did not work on Demonic Deities. In other words, this man named Kyubel must have been one of them.

During their exchange, Kyubel had been laughing flippantly as if *he* had let down his guard entirely.

"Everyone, ready yourselves." Helmios prompted his companions to get into formation. They were all aware of just how formidable an enemy a Demonic Deity was, so they stood on high alert.

"RAH! DIE!"

Sword Lord Anissa made the first move, charging straight in with her greatsword held high above her head. She had activated one of her skills, yet Kyubel managed to stop her blade by merely raising a single listless hand. However, the humans already knew that Demonic Deities were incredibly powerful and were therefore unsurprised. Every move they made was to allow Helmios to get close.

Seizing the moment Kyubel was occupied stopping Anissa's swing, Helmios ducked in. He murmured, "God Strike" under his breath, causing his orichalcum sword to give off a dazzling glow. When he grew close enough, he thrust the sword forward, aiming for the clown's heart with unerring accuracy.

Thunk.

“Interesting. So this is the power that Elmea gave you. I can see how it’d kill Demonic Deities. Looks like he really went all out for you.”

“What?!”

Helmios could not believe his eyes. Kyubel did not stop his strike with a hand like he did with Anissa’s. Rather, Helmios’s sword had stopped right above his heart without Kyubel even doing anything. The general peered down at the shining weapon with curiosity, touching it all over.

“By the way—sorry, but that skill of yours doesn’t work on me. ’Cus I’m not a Demonic Deity. I’m a Greater Demonic Deity.” After casually correcting Helmios’s misunderstanding, Kyubel drove a fist into the Hero’s abdomen, completely ignoring the orichalcum armor he was wearing.

“Oof!”

“H-Helmios!” Anissa called out before turning back to Kyubel. “You bastard! Let go of my sword!”

Helmios’s companions watched in shock as the Hero was sent flying, yet they valiantly surged forward in attack nonetheless. Helmios blacked out before he had time to tell them to run.

□ □ □

One day later, Helmios awoke in a makeshift bed. A man that he recognized approached him.

“Ohhh, Lord Helmios! You’ve come to!” It was the Alliance general who was supposed to be leading the defensive forces back at the fortress.

“Wh-Where am I?” Helmios shook his head, trying to clear his head, then suddenly gasped. “Where is everyone?!”

“You’re at the fortress right now,” the general replied. He then explained that a scout had found Helmios unconscious and brought him back.

“What about my companions?! Where *are* they?!” Helmios demanded, realizing that he did not see any of them in the room and immediately imagining the worst.

“My lord, you just woke up. I’m not so sure you want to see their remains right away...”

“Their...remains? *All* of them?”

“I’m very sorry to say so, but...”

The scout had apparently found Helmios lying among the corpses of his party members. Kyubel was already gone. In other words, Kyubel had intentionally chosen not to finish Helmios off.

“I...see...”

Helmios hung his head upon understanding the situation. He knew that in less than a month, he would have another full party of new companions. Given its size, Giamut had plenty of Saints and Sword Lords. Many who attended the Academy dreamed of fighting alongside the “hope of humanity.”

Helmios looked around, taking in his surroundings. Here, at least, the casualties had not climbed very high just yet. After failing his mission and losing his companions, Helmios resolved to at least protect this fortress.

He glanced at his orichalcum armor and sword, which stood propped up against the wall, then turned his gaze to the palm of his hand. He had long since reached the point where the gods stopped giving him trials, and it was unlikely that he would find equipment better than what he already had. He had asked himself what more he could do millions, billions of times, but he never found an answer.

Knock, knock.

“Hm? What is it? Enter.” Helmios looked toward the door, wondering if the general was back to say something he had forgotten to say earlier. However, the person who entered was an elf he did not recognize.

“Excuse me. I heard that Hero Helmios has returned, so...”

“Do you have business with me?”

“Yes, sir. The Sovereign of Spirits in Rohzenheim wishes to see you.”

“Is this about that elven squad I saved again? I already turned down the reward he offered.”

Some time ago, a relief squad of elven healers had come under attack by the Demon Lord Army. Helmios saved them, and afterward, he received word that Rohzen wanted to thank him in person, but he politely declined.

“That is not it. Lord Rohzen has delivered a new prophecy: ‘The light of hope shall soon shine on the world. It will also be the hope of Hero Helmios.’ Please, sir, come to Rohzenheim.”

“*My* hope...?”

Did such a thing even exist? Real, true hope—not made of papier-mâché and ostentatiously embellished?

And so the Hero who was on the verge of giving in to despair set out for the Ratashian Academy in search of a new hope.

Short Story 2: The Struggles of Pelomas the Merchant

On a certain day during Allen and his friends' first summer break, they had returned to their base to find a guest waiting for them. The servants informed Allen that the guest claimed to be acquainted with him, saying his name was Pelomas.

Did Pelomas really come all this way just to meet me?

When Allen dropped by the parlor, Pelomas sprang up from the sofa like a spring and bounded up to him.

"You're here! You're finally back! I've been waiting for ages! I've looked everywhere for you, you know!"

"Hey, Pelomas. It's been a while."

Apparently he came because he had business with Allen. Allen suggested that they discuss it over dinner.

Pelomas was one of Allen's childhood friends who had the Merchant Talent. He was currently attending a commercial school in the royal capital. Just like the Academy, his school was also out on summer break at the moment, so he had seized the opportunity to come find Allen.

As Cecil and Keel did not know Pelomas, Allen introduced him to them. On the other side of the table, Krena and Dogora had already begun digging into the feast laid out by the servants with gusto. Cecil looked him over, then at Allen.

"So you still had other childhood friends. How do I put it... This one seems *normal*."

How rude!

"How'd you even find me here anyway?" Allen asked out of curiosity.

"I went around and asked *so many* places. The Academy and the Adventurer's Guild, for starters," Pelomas replied, trying to convey just how much hardship he had gone through.

"Well, okay... What can I do for you, then?"

"That's, well..." Upon being asked the purpose of his visit, Pelomas suddenly blushed and started fidgeting.

Unable to bear it any longer, Cecil cut in. "Well, out with it. What is it?"

Eventually, Pelomas managed to start talking, beginning with, "So, I, uh, went to ask Mr. Chester for permission to court Fiona."

Chester was a man with significant influence in Granvelle City who owned the city's biggest and most high-class inn. And Pelomas had gone to him with a request—namely, permission to court Chester's daughter Fiona, whom he had fallen in love with at first sight, with the intention of marriage. The man gave this response: "Show me what you're worth. If I determine you to be worthy of my daughter, then I'll give you permission."

Pelomas had the next three years—basically, until his graduation from the commercial school—to prove his worth. He was studying as hard as he could, but he had grown uneasy and thus sought out Allen for help. He finished his account by lamenting his failure to make any headway whatsoever over the past six months.

Fiona...is that Fiona, right? I never knew she had ties to Pelomas.

Allen knew the girl whom Pelomas was speaking of. He had saved her once when she was stuck inside a carriage and about to be eaten by a murdergalsh. Her father had rewarded Allen with gold coins, which he then used to purchase his very first mithril sword. Allen still recalled the memory fondly.

"*Now* I see how you're from the same village as Allen!" Cecil exclaimed. She knew that Chester was a magnate who owned other high-class inns in the royal capital and multiple cities across Ratash. In fact, he had provided loans and other support to House Granvelle on many occasions.

In other words, Pelomas, the son of the village chief of a tiny frontier village, was attempting to win the hand of the heiress of a hotel empire.

"Is *everyone* you know like this?" Keel asked Allen wryly.

Cecil whirled on him. "Are you talking about *me* as well? Hmm?"

"Huh? That's not what I said!" Keel protested.

Allen was glad to see that the two of them had gotten close enough to exchange this sort of banter.

"So, Allen..." Cecil turned back around. "What're you gonna do? You'll help him, right?"

"I...will? Uh, Cecil, you look really excited about this for some reason."

"Of course I am! It sounds like fun!"

Ah, is this what I think it is? She wants to play matchmaker with Fiona and Pelomas?

Back when Allen worked at House Granvelle, Fiona had called on the mansion every so often. After Allen rescued her, the frequency of her visits increased to at least once a month. Allen knew that she and Cecil were on rather bad terms. Due to their differences—commoner and noble, rich and poor—he had witnessed their attempts to one-up each other many times before coming to Academy City.

After giving Pelomas's predicament some thought, Allen came up with what he thought was *the* best way to force Chester to acknowledge Pelomas as a merchant.

"How about you open your own store and buy out Mr. Chester's?"

"Huh? *B-Buy out?*" This bold idea of buying out the store from one of the wealthiest men in the kingdom left Pelomas at a loss for words.

It was true that anyone twelve years or older could open their own shop—it was simply a matter of submitting an application with the Merchant's Guild. However, Pelomas could not imagine accomplishing what Allen had suggested within decades, and he only had three years.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Cecil agreed. “Since you’re a merchant, you should definitely open your own store. But you’ll need a name for it. ‘Store Pelomas’ just wouldn’t cut it.”

As she started brainstorming after summarily dismissing Pelomas’s name, Krena and Dogora chose this time to join the conversation.

“You should make it ‘Pelomas Meats,’ then!”

“No way, ‘Pelomas Weapons’ is better.”

Uh, why is Pelomas’s company being forced to specialize in only meats or weapons?

Sensing that no one was taking his problem seriously, Pelomas leaped to his feet and shouted, “Please stop it! I’m serious about Fiona!”

Oooof, it’s like I’m watching someone live out their adolescence right in front of me. If we were in my old world, Pelomas would be in seventh grade. Wait, huh?

As Allen was giving Pelomas a look of amusement and understanding, he suddenly noticed a heat haze rising up around Pelomas’s body, indicating that his friend had activated his Extra Skill.

“Hold on, why can *you* use that?!” Dogora, who had only recently learned to use it himself, made a face at Pelomas as if adding “when you’re just...*you!*”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry. I figured out how to activate it not long ago. It’ll, uh, settle down soon,” Pelomas said apologetically as he sat back down and took a few deep breaths. When he had calmed down a little, he explained that for some reason, whenever he thought about Fiona, his Extra Skill would activate on its own.

Allen, who had grown curious about what effects a Merchant’s Extra Skill would have, stopped Pelomas from deactivating it. “Wait a moment. What does your Extra Skill actually do?”

“Huh? Um...it’s called Libra, and it tells me how much things are worth.” Upon having his Extra Skill checked at his school, Pelomas had learned that it enabled him to compare the value of goods and to convert those values into various currencies.

“The value of goods, huh...” Allen rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then picked up a pen. “Okay, how much is this pen worth?”

Without hesitation, Pelomas replied, “One silver and twenty copper.”

Astoundingly, the price he gave was exactly how much Allen had paid for it at the nearby stationery store. Allen proceeded to point to several things, such as the molmo fruit on the table, and Pelomas accurately stated their prices down to the copper.

“How about these, then?” Allen took out a bottle and a red fruit from his grimoire’s Storage.

Pelomas was quite surprised from seeing Allen’s Storage at work for the first time, but he quickly calmed down and priced the bottle at two silver and the fruit at one copper before adding, “That bottle is filled with sauce made from that red fruit, right?”

Allen nodded. “That’s right.”

Just as Pelomas had guessed, what Allen had taken out was a bottle of a special sauce made from the red fruit that Cecil had once tried to pick while sitting on Allen’s shoulders. Allen and the head chef had developed the recipe themselves after much trial and error; the process involved drying the fruit before the head chef turned it into a sauce. It had a refreshing flavor that paired amazingly well with great boar meat.

Allen’s companions seemed confused about where he was going with this line of questioning as Pelomas looked at him, worried.

“Mm, I think this just might work,” Allen nodded with satisfaction. This skill is more than enough to be Pelomas’s ticket to demonstrate his worth to Chester.

Pelomas’s face lit up. “Really?! You mean it?!”

“Hold on, take it back a few steps,” Cecil cut in. “Explain what you’re thinking to us properly.”

“To sum it up, Pelomas has the ability to create new products without needing to do market research,” Allen replied before proceeding to elaborate on the usefulness of Libra.

The process of selling a product first required coming up with an idea, then turning it into a product, and then doing market research to determine the most appropriate price to sell at. This last step involved working out how much demand there would be and how much people would be willing to pay for it. However, Pelomas’s Extra Skill, Libra, basically eliminated the entire third step.

Understanding dawned on Cecil’s face. “You mean, as long as he has an idea for a product, he can start to profit off it right away?”

“Exactly. What’s more, his price would be even more spot-on than actually doing the market research. Normally, merchants might misread the market, or sometimes just never arrive at the right price.”

It took time and money to conduct market research, and there was always the risk of reaching the wrong pricing strategy. However, Pelomas’s skill effectively made it free, instant, and reliable. It was an incredible ability.

“Um, so...?” Pelomas sort of understood why Allen was getting so excited, but he could not see how it related to him showing Chester his worth.

“Here ya go.” Allen plopped a small pouch on the table.

“Wait, a hundred gold?!” As he still had Libra activated, Pelomas could immediately determine the number of gold coins within the pouch.

“Use this to open your store. Consider it your starting capital. Additionally, I’ll ask Viscount Granvelle if it’d be possible to license the rights to sell this sauce to you.”

“You want me to do *what?*”

“Use this money to hire people and establish a market for yourself. Start with one shop and expand it.”

Allen then went on to discuss the general plan going forward. An initial investment would be needed in order to turn what Allen had already developed—and whatever he would think up in the future—into manufactured products. As such, he wanted Pelomas to take the hundred gold to establish a business. Although this world was so hierarchical that unfettered competition could hardly be relied upon, Allen figured that he could get Viscount Granvelle, who now had connections to many different factions, to back this company. With the viscount's support, not only would Pelomas be able to do business throughout the Granvelle fiefdom, but it was possible that he could establish a foothold in the royal capital.

Yes, yes, make your company large enough to eventually help me gather magic stones! I don't mind fronting a little bit of cash to make it happen! And hey, a friend in need, right?

"Well, sounds like you've got a pretty fleshed-out course of action," Cecil said. "All that's left is to come up with a name for the store. Allen, do you have a snappy one in mind?"

"I-I suppose so," Pelomas agreed. "Can you think of anything, Allen?"

Apparently, Pelomas was willing to give Allen the honor of naming his company. The rest of the Gamers looked at Allen expectantly, waiting to hear his suggestion.

Hmm... Well, we want this to become a store that sells products that people'll want to spend their money on.

When it came to something that fully encompassed Allen's vision of offering products so attractive and enticing that customers would be willing to spend any amount of money to purchase them, only one name came to mind.

"I think 'Pelomas Whaling Company' would be perfect."

"Whoooaaa! I think I like that!" Pelomas exclaimed.

And so, Pelomas set up the Pelomas Whaling Company during his first summer break at commercial school.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing this book! Due to your support, this third volume of *Hell Mode* is now out on shelves. I cannot fully express how grateful I am—thank you so much.

I pretty much did the same in volume 2, but I have once again gone all the way to Earth Star Novel's upper limit for how long a volume can be. I really do regret it.

It was my editor who suggested that we fit each arc of the web novel into one published volume. That way, it would be easier to read and thus be more immersive. That was our intention. Yes, it was intended…

Look forward to seeing whether the fourth volume will contain the entirety of the fourth arc.

I realized I haven't really talked about myself—Hamuo—in my afterwords. So I guess I'll rectify that now. But just a little bit, so I don't run out of material for volume 4 onward.

I'm a man, and while I usually live in another world, in this world I'm a part-time author living in Fukuoka. Yep, good o' Fukuoka. (I rarely use the Hakata-ben accent, though.) I write when I get home from my corporate job and on my days off. Whenever one of my books gets published, I like to go see how well it's selling at the bookstore closest to me. Please don't target me when I have my guard down.

My favorite food is mint chocolate. When it comes to ice cream, flavors other than mint chocolate don't exist in my mind.

My dream is to become a best-selling author one day and then use my earnings to rent a room at a countryside inn with an amazing view and work on my manuscript there. I want to stay cooped up there for a few years. The proprietress would ask, "Hamuo-sensei, how goes the manuscript?" Then I would look out onto a garden painted silver with snow and, in a voice with the gravitas of a literary master, I'd reply, "Mm, gazing at the scenery outside is doing wonders for visualizing my story." You have no idea how big my dream is getting!

In actuality, however, my bathtub is where I get most of my ideas. That's right. *Hell Mode* is given life while I boil myself in my own bath. That's where I'm most able to ponder my story. I sit there in the water, furiously thinking up ideas as my notebook gets wrinkled from the humidity and my bath water grows cold.

In order to develop my aura as a literary master, I've tried visiting a coffee shop, but I end up being distracted by what's going around me; it's not working out great.

My day job has me sitting at a desk all day. Since I'm also hunched over a keyboard when I get home, my waist and shoulders get a bit stiff. I do frequent a Thai massage parlor, though. There, even when they're pulling my arms backward and making my back arc like a shrimp, I'm still thinking

up plot ideas. There've been a few times now when I've gotten a good idea for a short story in the middle of a session and I've had to fight to keep it in my mind so that I wouldn't forget it. Unfortunately, there've been even more instances where I've lost ideas to the inky void of sleep due to how great the massage felt.

In short, the story of *Hell Mode* is one born of long hours of simmering in the bath, of stiff shoulders, and of pitched battle with sleep. And of course, I go through all of this entirely for the sake of you, my dear reader.

Since this is an afterword, I also want to talk about something that I really put a lot of effort into: the political structures of the countries. Volume 2 went into detail with the Kingdom of Ratash, the country where Allen was born. Despite his reluctance to do so, Allen became rather involved in the various power struggles between the aristocrats, royal envoys, and even the king.

Here in volume 3, the term "Five Continent Alliance" started coming up every once in a while. I created it as I thought it made sense for the countries to form such an international body after having been under attack by the Demon Lord for decades.

Near the end of this volume, Sophie and Meruru joined the party, introducing the elven and dwarven races to this story. The countries in this world each have unique races, worldviews, gods, and histories—some of them aren't even fighting the Demon Lord Army. Not a single one of them are identical. So I'm left with the task of bringing all these vastly different elements together into one cohesive story, and it can be hard sometimes.

Allen was born into this world more than fifty years after the Demon Lord had begun attacking the world in an effort to obliterate it. This volume ends with him deciding to leave the Academy to help Rohzenheim stand against an escalated assault by the Demon Lord Army. I hope you look forward to seeing how Allen will interact with the various countries that will show up in the future.

This series, *Hell Mode*, also has a manga serialization. Have you guys added the Comic Earth Star page to your browser bookmarks yet? They're releasing one chapter each month, so please go check it out. The first volume, which covers Allen's life as a serf, has relatively fewer lines, but I've heard from the manga editor that there'll be a lot more in the second volume, which gets into Allen's time working for House Granvelle. I sincerely hope that you enjoy this version of the story too. I'm sure Allen's evil grin will show up some time.

Let us meet again for volume 4. I'd be very grateful if you'd continue giving me your support. Well, until then!




Thankyou
so much!!
Mo




KRENA
DOGORA
ALLEN
KEEL
CECIL



Bonus Short Stories

Defense of the Northernmost Fortress

A lone elf stood at the top of a fortress, glaring out across the empty land that stretched all the way to the horizon. Not a single moving thing in sight.

This was the northernmost fortress on the continent of Rohzenheim. For fifty years the Demon Lord Army had thrown itself against its walls, and for fifty years it had stood proud and unassailable. The scale of the fortress was matched by very few elsewhere in the world—it could house a million troops and was surrounded by towering walls a hundred meters high, keeping out all monsters regardless of size.

Normally, a staggering amount of time and labor would be required to construct a fortress of this magnitude. And yet, this particular one had been created by a single elf. It was said that he had possessed the Talent of Grand Spirit User, so beloved by the spirits that he could evoke them strongly enough that they had physical forms. This fortress was one of the miracles that he had performed through the power of the spirits.

The sound of footprints approached from behind. “Ah, so this is where you were, Field Marshall Lukdraal. It is almost time for the strategy meeting, sir.”

“Mm.” The elf nodded and turned around. He appeared to be over fifty years old and was clad in armor. This was Lukdraal, the most senior commander at this fortress.

When he entered the war room, he found the other generals and officers already waiting for him. After greeting everyone, he took his seat.

“The air wasn’t good up there. The spirits seemed pained,” he commented.

The elves lived closely with the spirits. Although Field Marshall Lukdrahl could not exactly manifest them, he could still sense them somewhat.

“I see, sir. Speaking of which, and I’m not sure whether this is related to this push by the Demon Lord Army, but the monsters are behaving differently than usual,” one of the scouting party leaders reported.

“What do you mean? Elaborate.”

“Yes, sir. We’re still in the middle of confirming, but we might be dealing with a much larger force this time.”

According to the scout, the number of besieging monsters was the same as it had been every year. However, instead of immediately landing and rushing toward this fortress, this time they were standing by in the open sea just offshore. If they were doing so to wait for reinforcements, it would mean a much greater force was going to assault the fortress in one massive push.

“I see. Perhaps we should brace ourselves for at least double the usual numbers,” Lukdraal replied pensively. “I’ll contact Fortenia myself.”

“As in, more than a million, sir?” One of the generals gulped. The Demon Lord Army usually sent 500,000 troops each year.

“Mm. They must have figured that increasing their numbers by only a little wouldn’t make much of a difference.”

If the Demon Lord Army had finally gotten serious about capturing this fortress that had not fallen once in fifty years, the idea to send double their usual numbers did not seem all that far-fetched.

“This is going to be one tough fight indeed.”

“And we do not have much time to prepare. Proceed with preparations immediately; there’s no need to wait for the next report from the scouts. We can’t have the troops returning to the World Tree just yet.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Also, begin evacuating all nearby villages.”

“Y-You mean to say we will fall?”

“It never hurts to be extra cautious.”

Right outside Rohzenheim’s capital, Fortenia, was a massive tree that reached all the way to the sky called the World Tree. This tree, said to have nurtured even Sovereign Rohzen, was one of the objects of the elves’ worship. They believed that when they died, they would return to and become one with the World Tree. To that effect, they strongly desired to be in view of the World Tree when they died.

The World Tree was not visible from this fortress. Field Marshall Lukdraal urged his subordinates to make all possible preparations so that the troops could survive at least until they returned to the shade of the World Tree. He then headed off to use the magic tool meant for communication between this northern fortress and the elven capital to make his report.

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Several days later, as the elven force continued shoring up their defenses, Field Marshall Lukdraal received a report from a colonel who led a battalion of scouts.

“I see, three million. That’s six times their usual annual number. I suppose this means the Demon Lord Army is finally getting serious about wiping us out.”

“So it seems, sir. What should we do?”

The monsters not only crowded the shore of the continent, but they obscured the ocean surface all the way to the horizon. This fortress was not all that far from the coastline. Once the Demon Lord Army began marching, they would arrive here in no time at all.

“If they’re coming, then they’re coming. We have no choice but to fight. I’ll contact Her Majesty.”

The evacuation of the nearby villages was still ongoing. If this fortress fell, it would lead to a massive number of casualties. In preparation for the worst, Lukdraal made sure to keep in constant contact with Fortenia. After

giving his report, Field Marshall Lukdraal also requested that the capital take over directing the evacuation process.

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Not long after, the tide of monsters arrived, their footsteps shaking the ground as much as the hearts of the brave elves. Even so, the soldiers shored up their resolve, galvanizing themselves with the sole thought of protecting their homeland.

The monsters continued their relentless approach. Five hundred meters. One hundred meters. All too soon, they were at the castle walls.

“Tell the archers to maintain ranks and fire in volleys! The Spirit Mages are to focus fire on the big lunks! Watch out for the boulders that the monsters are throwing! Remind the Healing Mages to heal those on the front line as quickly as possible!”

After quickly analyzing the assaulting force, Field Marshall Lukdrahl swiftly determined the best method of attack and began barking out orders to the waiting generals. It was time for the elves to demonstrate why this northern fortress had never fallen since its erection more than fifty years ago.

The elves’ fighting style placed a heavy emphasis on defense, as they had a lot more people with Talents that dealt damage from a distance rather than up close. Those with the Archer and Bow Master classes lined the ramparts, numbering more than a hundred thousand in total. With a single command, they drew their bows and loosed their arrows as one, creating a cloud of projectiles that pierced the foreheads of Rank B monsters with incredible accuracy.

Standing behind the archers were battalions of elves who manipulated Spirit Magic. They called on the power of the spirits and filled the air with fireballs that reduced whole swathes of the monster army to mere charcoal.

However, the monsters were hardly just sitting still and doing nothing. The massive ones with great strength, such as orc kings and trolls, lobbed boulders and massive spears with enough force to fly up a hundred meters and reach the top of the wall. It was the job of the Healing Mages to tend to the troops who got wounded by these attacks.

No matter how many monsters there were, the elves swore they would hold fast as long as needed. If they failed, it would lead to the death of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of their countrymen. Failure was not an option, so the soldiers fought on with all they had.

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Half a day later, the elves were still going strong and steadily adding to the corpses strewn before their walls.

“Hmph, it’s the same battle all over again. How uninspiring.” A figure murmured as he surveyed the battle from a position beyond sight of the elves.

“So it seems, Lord Rehzel.”

“As expected, we can’t make any further headway attacking the same way as before. Glaster, tell the orc generals to ‘move the mountains.’”

“Sir, yes, sir!” The man that Rehzel called Glaster saluted before turning around to face Rank A monsters wearing crowns and cloaks. “Orc generals! Move the mountains!”

“Groooaaaaawwwww!”

When the orc generals passed the order down to them, the orc kings promptly began gathering their dead—and nearly dead—comrades in enormous piles. By continuously piling up the corpses ahead, the piles soon became mountains. Once the mountains grew sufficiently large enough, the orcs dug their feet in and began to push them forward, effectively using their comrades as shields. The closer they got to the fortress’s walls, the taller the mountains grew—until they eventually reached the height of the ramparts.

The elves stared in astonishment. They desperately blasted the mountains with fire balls and everything else on hand, but ultimately failed to collapse or destroy them. Soon enough, the piles of corpses crashed against the walls, now serving as ramps for the enemy forces to charge onto the parapets. With their defenses overcome, the elves’ lines collapsed.

In this way, the northernmost fortress, which had remained impregnable for over fifty years, fell within a single day. The Demon Lord Army’s invasion of Rohzenheim had begun in earnest.

Meruru’s Overseas Exchange

Meruru was born in a port town close to the Baukisian imperial capital. She was a first-year student at the Baukisian Academy and was back home for spring break.

“Hey, Meruru! Wake up! Dad’s coming home!”

Meruru’s brother called out to her, jolting her awake. After staying up late the night before, she had completely overslept.

She sat up in bed and stretched. “All right, I’m up now! Don’t leave me behind!”

Seeing her brothers file outside, Meruru quickly hurried after them in a fluster, still rubbing her bleary eyes. By the time she stepped outside, her siblings were already far ahead.

“Urgh! I *said* don’t leave me behind!” she grumbled when she finally caught up to her family, breathing heavily.

Her mother gave her an amused look and sighed. “Meruru, I told you yesterday that your dad’s coming home today, right?”

This caused Meruru’s four brothers to burst out in laughter. The six of them were currently heading toward the harbor. When they got close, they found the area already packed with other dwarves.

For a second, Meruru thought she felt the ground shake. She wondered if she had imagined it, but the reactions of her brothers proved otherwise.

All of them kept their eyes fixated on the ocean, eventually noticing a massive form emerging from the surface of the waves.

“Hey! I see it!”

“The golem’s coming up out of the ocean!”

“Huh? It’s carrying something over its shoulder.”

Meruru’s brothers became increasingly excited as the approaching form grew larger and larger. Soon enough, the golem reached the shore and set foot onto land. Meruru looked up as well, her eyes full of adoration and amazement.

“It’s hu—whoa! The golem caught the sea serpent!”

The golem was shouldering a monster almost thirty meters long. It approached the spectators until it was almost within arm’s reach, then gave the crowd a good look at the broken neck of the sea serpent. Their cheers rose another decibel as the onlookers heaped praise and thanks on the pilot of the golem.

According to the conversations going on all around, this sea serpent had settled close by and was terrorizing the area, so the navy had dispatched a golem to kill it.

The golem then headed off deeper into the town, bringing the sea serpent along. After it had gone quite a distance, a voice shouted from the direction of the port. “Heyyyyy Kanana! Kids!”

“Oh, honey!”

A dwarven man within the crowd disembarking from a ship had noticed Meruru’s group and was walking over while waving an arm energetically. It was Neneku, Meruru’s father.

“You all came to welcome me back?! Damn, I’m one happy man!”

“What? Nah, dad, we only came to see the golem. It was so freaking cool!”

“I dare you to say that again!” Neneku caught his jokester son in a clinch with a grappling move, making the rest of his family burst into laughter. “And Meruru! You’re back too!”

“Right?” Kanana said, pulling a troubled face. “And she said she wouldn’t come home!”

“Dad! Mom!” Meruru pouted at her reception even though she had gone to the trouble of making the trip. She could not protest much further, however, as she had indeed sent a letter a while back telling her parents that while she did have a spring break, she would not be coming home.

The family then began to trace their steps home, now with Neneku part of the group.

“Honey, how long will you be home this time?”

“Well...quite a while, I think. They said that our ship needs maintenance.”

“I see.” Kanana breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Dear, you do realize that if I don’t head out, I don’t get paid, right?”

When they got home, the family ate lunch together. After having missed breakfast due to oversleeping, Meruru now found her plate loaded with more fukaman, a dwarven fare of steamed buns, than ususal. She smiled gratefully at her mom before turning to her newly returned father. “Was it tough living on the ship, dad?”

“Well, the expedition wasn’t that long this time. The sea serpent wasn’t too far out at sea, so things we didn't have to go quite so far. I’ve been through worse.”

Neneku was a low-ranking soldier in the Baukisian navy. He did not possess a Talent—in fact, Meruru was the only Talented member of this family. The golems of Baukis served as the main fighting force against the Demon Lord Army and any monsters wreaking havoc off the country’s shores. However, the navy was not entirely composed of golem pilots—it had a large variety of positions for the Talentless, such as manning ships to take golem pilots to the locations where they were to be deployed. The salaries of these grunt soldiers were much lower than that of the pilots, but Neneku and Kanana had managed to earn enough to raise five children.

Meruru’s brothers were maintenance workers employed at a nearby naval port that had been expanded in response to the invasions from the Demon Lord Army. As it was a job that hired by the day and saw very little danger, their pay was even lower than their father’s.

It was thanks to the support of all her family members that Meruru was attending the Academy. She possessed the very rare Talent of Talos General. In order to prevent aristocrats from gaining undue leverage over Talented, the Five Continent Alliance had expressly forbidden countries and nobles from fully subsidizing students’ tuition fees.

If the Academy had been able to lend out a golem to Meruru, she might have been able to earn a bit of her own living from the dungeons, but this was apparently still beyond her reach. Therefore, it was her family who was paying the remainder of her tuition, all without saying a word to her and acting as if it was the only natural thing to do.

Halfway through the meal, Meruru spoke up. “Dad, mom, um...I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?” Her dad turned to give her his undivided attention.

The truth was that everyone in the family already knew that something must have happened with Meruru for her to come home. They had simply chosen to continue interacting with her in the same way as before until she felt comfortable enough to bring it up herself. After all, she had previously told them that she would not be coming home due to how expensive the magic ship cost for a round trip. For the same reason, she had not come home when it had been summer break the previous year. And yet, here was Meruru, showing up all of a sudden when spring break was almost over.

Everyone looked at Meruru.

“I, um, am thinking of going on an overseas exchange. Because the Academy said it would subsidize everything.” In an roundabout way,

Meruru was implying that her family would no longer have to pay for her tuition. Her homeroom teacher had confirmed that the subsidy from the school would be enough to cover her tuition and living costs all the way to her graduation.

“Huh? So you’re leaving for somewhere?” Her father, as well as her mother and brothers, all looked at Meruru with worry in their eyes.

In an attempt to reassure them, Meruru said in a joking tone, “Yeah, but I figured that it’s all the same in that it’s not *here*, you know. I think it’s a country named Ratash.”

“I see. Guess we made you worry.”

“Of course not! Thank you for raising me all this time. When I earn a ton of money with my Talent, I’ll send some home!” Meruru grinned and flexed her bicep.

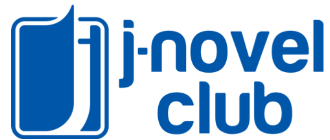
Baukis was a country that spared no expenses in spending money on its Talented and high achievers, and Meruru’s Talent was said to be one in ten million.

“Whoa, whoa, getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren’t cha? And don’t worry about sending money home. I’m still working, and so are your brothers.” Neneku chuckled before changing the topic. “So then, how was life at the Academy?” He gave his wife and sons a look, conveying that they should send Meruru off with peace of mind.

“Oh, did you know? In order to pilot a golem, I need to use a magic tool that looks like a round plate. It’s called a magic disc.” With her usual smile, Meruru proceeded to gush about all her experiences in the past year.

And so, after getting a warm send-off from her family, Meruru headed to the Ratashian Academy where she would eventually meet Allen.

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